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PLURALITY RELIGIOSITY AND PATRIOTISM

Critical Insights into Indonesia and Islam

AL MAKIN

This Al Makin's work covers various issues dealing mostly with Indonesian Islam in its relations with current Indonesian political, social and cultural changes. Written originally as columns, this book critically examines different subjects ranging from 'majority-minority' relations; religious issues including institutions such as the MUI to morality, conservatism and radicalism. With its wide-range contents, this book contributes to a better understanding of current development of Indonesian Islam, Indonesian politics and other related issues.
(**Professor Azyumardi Azra, CBE**, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta).

This book comes in a due time. It critically reflects the most current situation of Muslims in Indonesia. Plurality and religiosity in the name of patriotism always become a topic of the day elsewhere in the world. Dr. Al Makin amongst the small group of young Indonesian academicians who write and publish in English. International community waits for a long time to have a such publication by insiders to fully understand what is really going on in the (imagined) moderate Indonesian Islam.
(**Professor Amin Abdullah**, Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta).

A much welcome voice at a time most needed in Indonesia.
(**Professor Ariel Heryanto**, Australian National University)

This timely publication of several articles written by Al Makin during the last eight years offers the reader a clear view of the issues that challenge Indonesian Islam today, which, in turn, challenge Indonesia's post-Suharto democracy, still unsure of itself. Precisely by focusing in short reflections on actual problems the reader will find reliable information and critical evaluation of key issues Indonesia faces today.
(**Professor Franz Magnis-Suseno**, Driyarkara School of Philosophy, Jakarta)

This work in your hands sheds light on both Indonesian patriotism and Islamic reformation, as the combination of the faith and Indonesian culture is a long dialectical process. For those who want to know Indonesian Islam or Islam in Indonesia this book is a must read.
(**Professor Amsal Bakhtiar**, The Director of Islamic Higher Education of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia)

Al Makin's work offers a critical insight and honesty which picture the critical stage of Indonesian Islam during the reform era, so that the readers should read the work with an open minded attitude.
(**Professor Kamaruddin**, The General Director of Islamic Education of the Ministry Religious Affairs of Indonesia)

This is an important, wide ranging, collection of essays concerning nationalism, religion and pluralism in contemporary Indonesia. Al Makin is a powerful voice for reason, restraint, human rights and democratic values in the world's third largest democracy and most populous Muslim nation. Written over the course of a decade, they offer important perspectives on both the ongoing democratization of Indonesian society and attempts to use procedural democracy for undemocratic purposes. In today's world, in which democratic governance is increasing threatened by forces of sectarianism, ultra-nationalism and ethnocentrism masquerading as populism, it is critically important that scholars speak as "defenders of pluralism." In this volume Al Makin does exactly that.
(**Professor Mark Woodward**, Arizona State University)

A must read! This book is reflective notes of a prolific scholar who is curious and restless seeing the growing intolerance, radicalism, and terrorism haunting Indonesia and other Muslim countries. These issues are seen from historical, theological, political, and philosophical perspectives. This book is written in an entertaining way. Yet its publication will contribute to scholarly discussion of pluralism, religiosity, and patriotism.
(**Professor Noorhaidi Hassan**, Director of Graduate Faculty, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta)

Islam is not merely about the Qur'an and Sunnah, but in practice the religion entails much more complex cultural, political, and societal elements which shapes a religious tradition. Al Makin's essays collected in this book presents an observation for at least eight years telling us Islam and these factors in Indonesian context have intertwined.
(**Professor Yudian Wahyudi**, Rector UIN Sunan Kalijaga)

This book also deals with minority issues, such as Ahmadiyah, which should be treated equally before Indonesian law as other majority groups. Indonesia based on Pancasila should give all religious groups equal protection (**Professor Iskandar Zulkarnain**, UIN Sunan Kalijaga)

PLURALITY, RELIGIOSITY, AND PATRIOTISM

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BHINNEKA TUNGGAL IKA

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To Nabiyya and Dei

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of my writing, published originally in *The Jakarta Post* between 2006 and 2016 in response to various news developing in the media covering the themes of religion, politics, and society in Indonesia. Each short essay responded to a specific issue that was hotly debated across various media in Indonesia. The writing of columns, or op-ed articles, for publication in newspapers has a long history in Indonesia. My work is neither alone nor the first, but rather is part of a longstanding tradition. Let me explain this briefly.

The writing and publication of columns offering scholarly perspectives pertinent to particular events or tragedies has been a tradition among Indonesian intellectuals since the late colonial period, when nationalist and religious leaders published their views and opinions in magazines and newspapers.[1] In this vein, they tried

[1] Among the earliest and known examples of this are letters written by Kartini. See Kartini, *Aku mau ...: feminisme dan nasionalisme : surat-surat Kartini kepada Stella Zeehandelaar 1899-1903*, trans. Vissia Ita. Yulianto (Jakarta; Yogyakarta: Buku Kompas ; [Program Pasca Sarjana Ilmu Religi dan Budaya (IRB), Universitas Sanata Dharma Press] IRB Press, 2004); Kartini, *Letters from Kartini: An Indonesian Feminist, 1900-1904*

to participate in directing the flow of information and shaping public awareness. Publication was one means by which they channeled their collective dream of establishing an independent nation. Sukarno is a case in point. He was active in writing on various topics relevant to Indonesian society in the late colonial period. His work was later compiled in the book entitled *Di Bawah Bendera Revolusi* (*Under the Banner of Revolution*) which was later banned by Soeharto during the New Order.[2] The book was reprinted after the regime collapsed, as Indonesian society welcomed freedom of speech and democracy. Further, the famous debate between Sukarno and Natsir over the relationship between religion and the state, which culminated in the adoption of Pancasila as the state ideology, provides clues about the vital role the media played in nurturing public opinion and shaping nationalist awareness.[3]

Benedict Anderson's famous thesis importantly draws our attention to the role of the media in creating the imagined state in the minds of communities mostly shaped by the writings of their leaders.[4] More so now than in the past, writing news columns and commenting in the public sphere opens one's opinions up to a worldwide audience. Not all scholars, however, are willing to engage in public debate. Many find it irritating and annoying to engage in as they are forced to simplify their language and academic jargon to get the attention of 'laymen'. It is imperative that in writing newspaper columns, scholars discuss topical themes

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(Clayton, Vic.; Melbourne, Vic.: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University ; Hyland House, 1992); Kartini, *Surat-surat Kartini: renungan tentang dan untuk bangsanya*, trans. Sulastin Sutrisno (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1979).

[2] Soekarno, *Dibawah Bendera Revolusi.* ([Djakarta: Panitya Penerbit Dibawah Bendera Revolusi, 1963); Al Makin, "Tanggalkan Khalifah Di Bumi Ini: Membaca Narasi Sukarno Tentang Sekularisme Turki," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 16, no. 2 (December 7, 2016): 323–47, doi:10.21154/al-tahrir.v16i2.554.

[3] Deliar Noer, *Ideologi, politik dan pembangunan* ([Jakarta]: Yayasan Perkhidmatan, 1983); Ahmad Suhelmi, *Polemik Negara Islam: Soekarno versus Natsir* (Jakarta; Bandung: Teraju ; Didistribusikan oleh Mizan Media Utama, 2002); Kahin, Audrey, "Natsir & Sukarno: Their Clash over Nationalism, Religion and Democracy, 1928-1958," in *Encountering Islam: The Politics of Religious Identities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Yew-Foong, Hui (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 191–217, http://203.131.219.242/cdm/ref/collection/iseas.edu/id/341; Ahmad Ali Nurdin, "Revisiting Discourse on Islam and State Relation in Indonesia: The View of Soekarno, Natsir and Nurcholish Madjid," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 1 (2016): 63–92.

[4] Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

from their own perspectives using common language that can be understood by the public. This is the greatest challenge in writing newspaper columns. For those who prefer to focus on their own research and their experiences in academic circles, this challenge can perhaps distract their attention away from their research and teaching duties. A few, however, are keen to engage with the public by trying to participate in the controversy and sway the direction of public opinion. My writings, compiled here take this direction.

Issues develop unpredictably in the public sphere and do not remain the same from week to week or from month to month: issues become less topical with the emergence of new issues. This is another challenge for newspaper and magazine columnists, one less likely to be faced by scholars or researchers with a long term commitment to a specific thematic focus. The latter may have to update their theories and data, but new theories do not come in a week or a month. Researchers take a long time to accomplish their work, which may then take much longer to get published. News writers, on the other hand, have to consider what is relevant on a daily or weekly basis. This presents another difficulty for scholars or researchers like myself who pay attention to a particular problem over a long period of time. I have devoted my attention to my two main works on prophethood, which were published by Peter Lang[5] and Springer[6] respectively. I have done this since 1998 after writing a paper about Musaylima, a claimant to prophethood based in Yamama, now the capital city of Saudi, Riyadh, while undertaking an MA course at McGill University. Since 2005, I have paid more serious attention to the issues of prophethood, delving more deeply into the accounts of Musaylima, I spent three years writing the MA dissertation on this. In 2009, I began to focus on the accounts of

[5] Al Makin, *Representing the Enemy: Musaylima in Muslim Literature* (Peter Lang, 2010); Makin Al, "From Musaylima to the Kharijite Najdiyya," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 51, no. 1 (2013): 33–60.

[6] Al Makin, *Challenging Islamic Orthodoxy: Accounts of Lia Eden and Other Prophets in Indonesia* (Dordrecht, Holland; Cinnaminson [N.J.], U.S.A.: Springer, 2016); Al Makin, "Pluralism versus Islamic Orthodoxy, the Indonesian Public Debate over the Case of Lia Aminuddin, the Founder of Salamullah Religious Cult," in *Social Justice and Rule of Law: Addressing the Growth of a Pluralist Indonesian Democracy*, ed. Thomas J Conners (Tembalang, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia; [New Haven: Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Diponegoro University ; Yale Indonesia Forum, 2010), 187–206.

another claimant to prophethood, Umayya b. Abi Salt.[7] Finally, in 2010, my attention moved to Indonesian prophets – chief among them, the prophetess Lia Eden. My most recent work on prophethood was published in late 2016. The issues of prophethood have been my primary research passion for 17 years. Prophethood has been a significant aspect of my scholarly endeavors, as such it intersects at times with what I have written in this collection of columns published in *The Jakarta Post*. The essays in this book are not separate from my scholarly research as some of the ideas I have long been passionate about permeate the essays of this book.

It was in 2006 that I started to write columns for *The Jakarta Post*. At the time, I was faced with at least two challenges: one was to delve deeply into the focus of my research and the other was to make my research relevant to daily religious, social, and political life in Indonesia. I tried to become a scholar and researcher who at the same time responded to news and issues developing in the media which impacted on social, religious, and political life. I did this because I did not want to be left behind, particularly on the issues of pluralism, tolerance, minority, and patriotism, which were under attack during the reform era. I wanted to stand tall and speak up on behalf of myself and those who called themselves pluralists, who were increasingly being alienated in the Indonesian media.

In Germany, where I studied and wrote these columns, there were many Indonesian students across many cities who formed various social and political circles. A few of them also joined Islamist political parties and conservative organizations. Notably, students with a science background seemed to experience a late conversion to religious piety. They became more zealous in their religious life than those whose background was in social studies or humanities (or Islamic studies). These late converts also mixed religious piety with political attitude. Some circles held religious sermons (*pengajian*) regularly and welcomed preachers from Indonesia to deliver speeches. As a result, I found many Indonesian students did not agree with the kind of strict religiosity promoted by the late

[7] Al Makin, "Sharing the Concept of God among Trading Prophets: Reading the Poems Attributed to Umayya B. Abi Salt," in *Religions and Trade : Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Al Makin, "Re-Thinking Other Claimants to Prophethood: the Case of Umayya ibn Abi Salt," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 48, no. 1 (2010): 165.

converts. The two groups argued with each other and quarreled on online mailing lists. I felt an obligation to respond to the issues they discussed, as my background is religious studies, humanities and social sciences, and I see the issue from a well-informed holistic perspective. Writing opinions in *The Jakarta Post* helped me to channel my frustration, pain and dissatisfaction in the face of what I saw to be rising religious insanity. Fortunately, friends also forwarded my columns to some mailing list groups, so that I did not have to provide ongoing explanation of my position. I also presented my columns at *blogspot.almakin.com*, which was visited often and my columns were also referenced for others purposes.

Although issues and themes change from time to time in the media, in my work I have tried to be consistent in the way in which I position myself as a scholar in the field of religion, philosophy, and social sciences. I have offered my perspective on several issues and made it clear where I stand. Distinct from the New Order era, during the reform era, democracy and open space emerged in the Indonesian public realm – conservatism and radicalism came into competition, and ideologies were challenged in the media and other public forums. In writing these essays on a regular basis, I tried to be consistent in voicing the position of pluralist, tolerant, and progressive intellectuals, without disconnecting myself from the Islamic religious tradition from which I grew. Indeed, Indonesians are serious about religion, particularly Islam. Incrementally, in the reform period, despite the shift to increasingly democratic processes particularly at the governmental level, public piety has been normalized. For example, anyone who wants to run for a political position has to show religious piety to convince the religious voters. Reasoning seems rare and has to be prioritized to compete with such conservatism. In this context, to write columns defending reason is indeed a critical duty. Otherwise, sanity has no advocate. What a sad situation.

In Western universities and academic institutions, such as in the United States, Europe, and Australia, in general, professional researchers and academics generally do not bother themselves with issues beyond the realm of their research foci, such as in the machinations of political, social, and religious life more broadly. In my experience as a research fellow in Bochum, Singapore,

Western Sydney, and Heidelberg, I witnessed that most of my colleagues concentrated on their own research thereby maintaining their productivity in proposing new theories and publishing their individual findings in their fields. As Indonesian scholars, however, we have an added duty to strive to achieve our dream for our nation, which is still in the making. We cannot let politics be dominated by politicians alone; we have to voice our reason, so that politics and politicians remain under vigilant public scrutiny. The Islamic institutions in Indonesia, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, *madrasah* (Islamic schools), *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), Islamic higher education facilities, and the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council), all need the contributions of well-informed, educated Muslims. We cannot abandon our role in this merely for the purpose of eliminating the distractions from our main research focus. Like the essays of Azyumardi Azra, Syafi'i Maarif, and others, the essays compiled here show my commitment to engagement in public controversy. Regardless of how few people read my opinions, whether my voice is heard or not, or whether my efforts are considered a waste of time by others, the work must go on.

This work containing several op-ed columns is divided into six chapters. The first chapter consists of six short essays discussing minorities and their fates in Indonesia, from Ahmadiyah, Shia, Gafatar, building mosques, and Muslim Malaysians' claim to the exclusive right to use the word Allah by prohibiting their Christian counterparts from using the word to designate the same God. These essays reveal how the issues of minority groups among the Muslim majority beg our serious attention for the sake of justice, humanity, and reason. Sadly, there were prosecutions and persecutions in many Indonesian provinces during the reform period. As far as the data and scholarly research shows, the discrimination against minorities in Indonesia was caused by two sides: the government's failure to equally protecting citizens before law and society's misunderstanding of pluralism, tolerance, and the co-existence of peoples of different faiths. Both the government and the wider society are responsible for discrimination against minority groups. It is impossible for the government to protect all citizens equally when the 1965 blasphemy law discriminating against minorities

remains valid and judicial review of the law failed to bring about a change. The movement to achieve this change continues. The wider society, on the other hand, has generally failed to defend and exhibit the values of tolerance, pluralism, and co-existence among the different faiths, and these values generally seem to be fading. These essays give voice to the need to defend these crucial humanistic values in demanding justice and promoting equality and pluralism.

The second chapter, consisting of twenty of the published columns, is about Islamic religiosity and covers many issues – from prophethood, the hajj pilgrimage to the holy land of Mecca, the role of Muslim religious leaders and the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) in Indonesian politics and Muslim religiosity, the fasting month of Ramadan (when some Indonesian radical Islamic groups tend to morally intimidate the public), comparison between the celebration of Idul Fitri and Christmas, the role of religion in society compared to that of football, the celebration of Idul Adha (ritual sacrificial feast), the position of the Quran for Muslims today, the role of Muhammadiyah (the second largest Muslim organization in the country), to sharia banking. In commentating on this wide array of themes, I offer a critical stance on the specific context of Indonesia. Indeed, Islamic tradition and theology needs critical insights from which a new perspective, a reformed theology, and a new role of the religion in society can be reformulated. Unlike Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism, which have all undergone 'serious change' and 'reformation' as a result of being subjected to criticism from insiders, Islamic theology and tradition have remained solid from the beginning of the history of Islam and untouched from a critical perspective. Any criticism has been quickly rejected, so that reformation has not worked. Indeed, there have been Muslim thinkers and intellectuals throughout the history of Islam who have argued for the use of reason over dogmatic acceptance, calling on Muslims to awaken the spirit of science, offering new Quranic hermeneutics, contextualization of Islamic law, and interreligious dialogue, etc. However, criticism seems to have had little impact on the way in which Islam has been practiced, as the religion remains stubbornly unchanged. From al-Jahiz to Arkoun, Sukarno to Nurcholish Madjid, Abddurrachman

Wachid (Gus Dur) to JIL (Liberal Islamic Network), Mukti Ali to Amin Abdullah, and Ibn Khaldun to Azyumardi Azra, apparently criticism is seen as an exclusively academic exercise, while the practices of Islam remain unchallenged. Many have dreamt of modern, post-modern, new hermeneutical interpretations, and other theoretical variants on the reinterpretation of Islam, yet Islam remains as it is. The essays in this chapter are an attempt to amplify the voice of criticism that is in competition with the robust growth of conservatism and radicalism of Islam which has been known to justify death through suicide bombing. This collection shows the way in which the practices and theology of Islam need to be reformulated for the sake of both scholars and religious practitioners. In short, this chapter challenges two elements in Islamic theology and religiosity: 1) the sacred status and the role of prophethood, the Quran, Hajj, Ramadan, Idul Fitri, Idul Adha, and ulama, and, 2) the rise of conservatism in relation to the themes of *jilbab* (veil), *ulama*, and *sharia* (such as in the banking system).

The third chapter consists of ten short essays dealing with the issues of radicalism and conservatism which are on the rise in Indonesia. All alert to the fact that radicalism has penetrated the public domain. Several groups have continued to intimidate the public with their bold rhetoric. While it is true that conservatism, radicalism, and other forms of fundamentalism do not directly relate to terrorism, and further that conservative persons and radicals do not necessarily support acts of terror, yet they do share the same ideology of the terrorists in their belief of an absolute truth. The belief in an absolute truth does not allow other groups to pursue their own version of the truth. For these fundamentalists, there is only one truth and that is theirs. This chapter is particularly concerned with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's inaction in curbing conservatism and radicalism, although he did show a stern attitude towards terrorism. This chapter also conveys the disappointment of those for whom the image of a tolerant Indonesian Islam is being jeopardized.

The fourth chapter presents seven columns discussing the way in which religious piety and morality is penetrating the public sphere. It explores how conservatism relates to radicalism, which in turn gives religious legitimacy to violence in the name

of religion. The rhetorical reasoning of conservatives indeed goes against common sense in terms of morality, in relation to sex, corruption, and dictatorship. It stands as ironic that conservatism and radicalism are on the rise in the era of democratization. This chapter presents a picture of the public battle between reason and radicalism in Indonesia.

The fifth chapter contains 21 essays dealing with nationalism and patriotism. A few of these were written around the time of the anniversary of Indonesian's independence each year, and recall the ways in which previous leaders fought to establish an independent nation after centuries of colonial rule, and brief occupation by England and Japan. Indeed, Indonesia is a plural society, blessed with immense ethnic, traditional, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. This led our leaders to wisely choose a state model with a middle path ideology, that is, a secular state with five guiding principles (Pancasila) as the official ideology but accommodating of the religious differences. One of the essays here recalls this middle path ideology, the principles of which are under threat from growing radicalism and conservatism. This chapter also covers current issues in politics, such as the phenomenal rise in Indonesian politics of Anas Urbaningrum, a young leader of the Democrat Party. The content of this particular column expired soon after being written, as Urbaningrum was charged by the KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission) for this involvement in a corruption scandal. As I mentioned earlier, news in the media changes fast. Urbaningrum is no longer the rising political figure my column hailed him to be.

The last chapter, presenting nine short essays, is devoted to Indonesia's position in the globalizing world, in which issues spread fast across the world through the internet. Two important issues are touched on in this chapter: Indonesian responses to the Pope Benedict XVI's speech in Regensburg Germany and the responses to the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Indonesian Muslims' responses to Pope Benedict's speech was my first piece published in *The Jakarta Post*. I explored this theme further in my writing and published an article in a peer-reviewed journal.[8] The second issue about the cartoon controversy also led me

[8] Al Makin, "Benedict XVI and Islam: Indonesian Public Reactions to the Regensburg Address," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 (2009): 409–21.

to research further and to write a journal article.[9] Indeed, Muslims' responses to both issues are representative of the relation of the West and East in the current online media era. Not only did the spontaneous responses lead to many commentaries in the media that condemned the West, they also led to various demonstrations and violent backlashes on behalf of the victims of blasphemy. In this regard, I do relate my comments in the newspaper, which expired fast, to my long term research project.

The publication of this work can contribute to both scholarship and Islamic theology. For scholars, this writing can serve as a window through which to see the development of the public sphere in Indonesia in relation to the issues of religion, politics, and society during the reform era. This can also be used to lead to further, more comprehensive research into the issues. My work may also be helpful in serving as a primary tool by which to excavate to deeper ground. For Indonesian Muslims, and perhaps also for Muslims in other parts of the world, not only does this collection offer critical insight into Muslim culture and tradition, and the ways in which politics and religion are intertwined, it also proposes a reformation of Islamic theology. To reform Muslim culture and tradition without involving reformation in theology is impossible. Neither is it possible to engage in dialogue with other faiths without scrutinizing one's own religious faith critically. Critical insight is necessary, as a path to both reformation and dialogue. However, this work also alerts us to the reality that the reputation of Indonesian Islam for tolerance, moderation, and the syncretism of culture and faith (which is different in character from other versions of Islam found in other countries, such as in the Middle East) is threatened. Indonesian Islam is indeed unique. However, as far as my long running research is concerned, there is a movement towards the homogenization of Indonesian Islam indicated by the growing orthodoxy and conservatism. Indonesian Islam was rich and diverse as expressed in the various local cultures of the islands of the archipelago. Lately, disturbing changes to the nature of Islam have resulted in shifts in the Indonesian socio-political landscape that are at odds with the ideal of democracy. This is a shift that

[9] Al Makin, "Revisiting Indonesian Public Reactions against Danish Cartoons Depicting Prophet Muhammad," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 5, no. 2 (2015): 195–229.

requires our serious attention.

As with my other books, with the publication of this book I owe many thanks to so many people. First of all, my gratitude goes to *The Jakarta Post* team who published my writing regularly for quite long time, until I finally stopped for a while due to research and teaching obligations. I will certainly someday continue to contribute humbly to the public debate. At the time I started writing my first article for *The Jakarta Post*, I was finishing my dissertation in Heidelberg under the supervision of Professor Susanne Enderwitz, who still pays attention to my work. I am also grateful to those who endorsed this book: Professor Amin Abdullah (UIN Sunan Kalijaga), Professor Azyumardi Azra (UIN Syarif Hidyatullah), Professor Yudian Wahyudi (Rector of the UIN Sunan Kalijaga), Professor Noorhaidi Hassan (the Director of Graduate Studies at UIN Sunan Kalijaga), Professor Iskandar Zulkarnain (UIN Sunan Kalijaga), Professor Ariel Heryanto (Australian National University), Professor Romo Magnis Suseno (Driyarkara School of Philosophy), Professor Philip Buckley (McGill University), Professor Mark Woodward (Arizona University), Professor Kamaruddin (The General Director of Islamic Education of the Ministry Religious Affairs of Indonesia), Professor Amsal Bakhtiar (The Director of Islamic Higher Education of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia). I thank to Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin of Syariah Faculty UIN Sunan Kalijaga for her advice to improve the title of this book, which I indeed heed. When I moved to Bochum for another fellowship, I kept contributing to *The Jakarta Post*, and even more so while undertaking fellowships in Singapore and Australia. Thank you to my friends and colleagues throughout the world and from the various disciplines of whom there are too many to mention by name. I have learnt so much from you all. You have helped to nurture my scholarly ability, and have enriched my perspectives in seeing this world. Thanks to the Al-Jami'ah team: Sayyidah Aslamah, Rezza Maulana, Saptoni, Arif Maftuhin, Euis Nurlaelawati, Ahmad Bunyan Wahib, Moch Nur Ichwan, Noorhaidi Hasan, and othe members, with whom I hang out. Thank you to the LPPM (Research and Community Engagement) team: Moh. Soehada, Muhrison Affandi, Ahmad Mughitz, Arif Maftuhin, Moh. Isnanto, and all the other staff whose names cannot be mentioned here. To Tracy Wright Webster,

thank you for generously and kindly advising me on my English language expression and publications. To Maryono who helped me with publishing this work, among others, thanks a lot. I always owe thanks to my love, Rofah, with whom I raise and witness the fast growth of our two knights, Nabiyya Perennia and Arasy Dei. To my siblings, Anis Hidayah, Ilham Khoiri, and Teguh Prawiro, and my nieces, Orien, Sakwa, and Binar, thank for staying close to each other as brothers and sisters, especially after our parents left us.

CHAPTER ONE
PLURALITY AND MINORITY

Persecuting, Prosectuing Minorities

Singapore, September 3, 2012

The assault on the Shiite group in Sampang on the East Java island of Madura is definitely a display of sectarian violence motivated mainly by religious sentiments that have been occurring across Indonesia lately. Denials of the role of religion in the incident, such as Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi's earlier claims, are absolutely irrelevant.

Rather than this conflict being a family affair as the minister suggested, narrow-minded understanding about religion in the case cannot simply be ignored. Keep in mind that religion cannot be ruled out in this case of harassment of a minority.

The minister has to differentiate between hundreds or thousands of family disputes related to divorce, children guardianship, inheritance, etc. and the recent human rights abuses carried out in the name of religion, or more precisely, the persecution of minority religious groups.

It is useless to deny the religious conflicts blatantly occurring before our eyes in order to defend the "political image" of the current government. Denying the new reality that Indonesian society has lost its religious harmony helps us to find neither causes

nor solutions. Honesty is indicative that we are serious in handling cases like the Sampang tragedy. The government, in this vein, is either avoiding honesty or simplifying the problem.

Persecution of minorities in our society (such as Lia Aminuddin's Eden group in Jakarta, Christian churches in Jakarta and West Java, and Ahmadiyah followers in West Java, Nusa Tenggara and other parts of the country), as well as their prosecution for their beliefs and faiths amount to a systematic abuse of human rights with religious legitimacy. The Sampang riot has only extended the list.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's immediate call to enforce the law in the Sampang case is rhetorically entertaining. However, upon carefully examining his statement, many will realize that his words convey unclear messages. Which law is the President referring to? The outdated 1965 law on blasphemy or the Criminal Code?

It is worth noting that under the two laws, many criminals and perpetrators of attacks on minority groups were set free, whereas the victims were put in jail. Leaders of minority groups—Lia Aminuddin, Abdul Rachman, Andito Putro Wibisono, Ahmad Mushoddeq, Buki Syahidin, Tajul Muluk, and dozens of others were convicted and sentenced to an average of 2.5 years in jail although their groups and followers came under threat and suffered serious wounds.

Who should be punished? Who should be blamed and cursed? Based on the 1965 blasphemy law and Criminal Code's Articles 156 and 335, the court convicted Sampang Shiite leader Tajul Muluk while the perpetrators of a previous attack on the Shiite community were allowed to roam free so that they could perpetrate the most recent assault on Aug. 26.

The police and the intelligence apparatus should not be left to shoulder the responsibility for the Sampang attack and other religious riots alone as they only followed orders. As in other cases, the police quickly took measures in the aftermath of the Sampang attack including arresting suspected perpetrators. Whether those people will be punished or not is not the police's business.

Nevertheless, the government's mindset and the whole justice system should be seriously reviewed. Only in 2010 did the Constitutional Court, under the leadership of Madura-born

Mahfud MD, turn down a judicial review request filed against the 1965 blasphemy law. Not only had radicals and conservative figures successfully terrorized numerous NGO activists, intellectuals and scholars who filed the judicial review motion, they also exercised intimidation in the process of the review.

In fact, the Constitutional Court knelt down to the radicals' agenda. The law was kept intact and is ready to prosecute anyone accused of insulting religions. Neither criticism nor challenge to religion is allowed in this country. Religion, particularly the one that is embraced by the majority, is well protected.

Persecuting and prosecuting minority groups, including the Shiites, for their beliefs and faiths is blatantly supported by the edicts of the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council). Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali has publicly supported the MUI's stance over and over.

According to the council, the Shiia, like the Ahmadiyah, the Eden Community, and various new Islamic sects founded by local prophets across Indonesia, are deviant. It appears that to embrace a faith that is different from the majority's is a crime. During the reform era, the MUI had more room to maneuver with its religious edicts and political opportunities. Note that the MUI's deputy chairman is also part of the presidential advisory team.

All in all, at the national level, the position of minorities is indeed at risk. They are weak in the eyes of the national laws and the central government has no clear mechanism to protect them. Any movement initiated by a minority group that arouses the suspicion of radical groups that on behalf of the majority will be scrutinized.

Even though the perpetrators are fully aware the violence they commit is forgiven by the law, the state's obscure commitment to protection of the minorities has created opportunities for various groups to carry out such attacks. Let us wait and see who the court will convict and imprison in the latest attack on Sampang's Shiites.

The minorities' demand for justice is just wishful thinking in this country. They are apparently destined to live in constant danger.***

Malaysia, Indonesia: Equally intolerant

Heidelberg, January 3, 2008

Rather than highlight the common beliefs Muslims and Christians share during Id al-Adha and Christmas celebrations recently, the Malaysian government decided to focus on their differences.

A Catholic weekly newspaper, *The Herald*, was told to stop using the word "Allah" recently, as it supposedly belongs exclusively to Muslims.

It appears levels of religious tolerance in Malaysia are not too different from those in eighboring Indonesia. The move to stop the word "Allah" being used in non-Muslim publications is to some extent comparable to the many fatwas (religious edicts) introduced by the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council), including in relation to the case of Ahmadiyah.

Another point of substantial comparison can perhaps be drawn here. While the fatwa condemning Ahmadiyah has often been misused by radical groups, religious discrimination toward minority groups can also be felt in Malaysia, especially in relation to this recent case. The recent claim made by Malaysian

authorities rests merely on fallacies, evident in at least the historical, theological and political spheres.

As far as both Western and Muslim scholars are concerned, the word "Allah" has been commonly used by Arabs since pre-Islamic times. In this regard, one cannot ignore the fact that "Allah" cannot be divorced from Judeo-Christian traditions.

Islam can simply be viewed as an heir to these monotheistic traditions. It has continued the legacy of the word "Allah" in that it refers to "one God".

Historically and theologically speaking, Islam neither emerged or stood alone in this world. It has always been a part of the complex history of Judaism, Christianity and, last but not least, humanity.

Although Malaysia is at the moment luckier than Indonesia in terms of economy, it is no stronger in terms of democracy. Indeed, freedom of expression in the political realm can be felt more in Indonesia than in Malaysia. Aside from the fact political opposition is no longer taboo in Indonesia, Indonesians are also able to criticize their government much more openly than Malaysians can.

The orders handed down to *The Herald* by the Malaysian authorities were politically incorrect in regard to freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, some radical Indonesian writers view Malaysian intellectuals as being higher than their Indonesian counterparts. It is concerning that radical yet popular writers have irrationally attacked leading Indonesian scholars, including Amin Abdullah, Azyumardi Azra, Komaruddin Hidayat, Ahmad Syafi'i Ma'arif, Dawam Rahardjo and Djalaluddin Rachmat. It is far from my intention here to criticize everything related to Malaysia, but it is undeniable that two major terrorists, Azahari and Noordin M. Top, are Malaysian citizens and have trained a number of terrorists in Indonesia.

Before he became well-known, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's activities also took place in Malaysia. Indonesians do feel threatened by radicalism coming from those who proudly associate themselves with Malaysia. Indeed, these people are always ready to poison young Indonesians through the online media, telling them to hate any intellectual thinking but to accept dogmatic and ideological blindness (*taklid*).

This does not necessarily mean we should hate everything coming out of Malaysia. We should learn from each other, as we have always done. In the past Malaysian students obtained their degrees in Indonesia, while Indonesian students also studied at Malaysian universities.

To illustrate this point, an Indonesian liberal activist, Lutfi Syaukani, was also educated in Malaysia. In addition to this, some Indonesian intellectuals have also migrated to Malaysia so as they are better appreciated. There are intellectuals in both countries. Perhaps Dr. Farish M. Noor should be regarded as an example of a model Malaysian intellectual with an international reputation.

Malaysia is no different to Indonesia. As neighbors, we both need to learn much more about religious tolerance and protecting minority groups.***

The right to build mosques and churches

Yogyakarta, October 15, 2010

Mosques and churches, in which believers pray to God for a happy life in this world and salvation in the world to come, can also cause tension and conflict. In this archipelagic country — with a boast-worthy diversity of ethnicities, faiths, ideologies, political parties and social organizations — mosques and churches of minority groups are under attack.

Ahmadiyah's mosques and the churches of the HKBP (Batak Protestant Church) in Bekasi are cases in point. Ironically, those who attacked those places of worship, such as the FPI (Islam Defenders Front), also pompously voiced their disagreement in public statements. They question the rights of minorities to build places of worship that they perceive as a threat to their mosques.

Worse still, the government, e.g., the religious affairs minister, makes that disagreement its main concern and shields the mosques of the majority — which are in fact "safe and sound" as nobody dares to disturb them.

The mosques and churches belonging to minority groups are then further discredited, while some of the perpetrators are roaming free and looking for vulnerable people who can be turned

into radicals. Through the public media, schools and mosques, the younger generation can become the prey of radicals.

True, some, such as Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and those who stabbed the HKBP leaders, were jailed for their roles in spreading hate, causing disorder and breaking the law. However, their ideologies are far from diminishing in this country.

Nevertheless, you may wonder why the "majority" is so scared of the "minority". Common sense and logic are turned upside down. Who is intimidating whom? Who are the perpetrators and who are the victims? The minority or the majority? Which one is increasing? Mosques or churches? Ahmadiyah's mosques or the Muslim majority's mosques?

Throughout history, the diversity of this country has been palpable. Evidence can be seen in the remaining sanctuaries in Indonesia, Hindu and Buddhist temples scattered throughout many cities. Most of these places of worship — such as many of the old churches in Europe that attract tourists with their photo-ready exotic sculptures — no longer function.

Certainly, Hindu and Buddhist temples were built much earlier than mosques and churches, where believers are still coming to listen to preachers' words.

What is also obvious is that the number of majority Sunni Muslim mosques is noticeably increasing. In 1997 the Ministry of Religious Affairs recorded 392,044 mosques. In 2004 the number was 643,834. Now the number has likely doubled or tripled.

"Nevertheless, you may wonder why the 'majority' is so scared of the 'minority'. "

The increase in the number of mosques can be felt whenever you visit an Indonesian city — provincial, district, or subdistrict — you will find a new mosque with a shiny dome.

Mosques dominate many cities' landscapes. In front of the Prambanan temples in Yogyakarta a mosque stands mightily. In the heart of Pekalongan, Central Java, a large mosque was built in front of an old church. Mosques are also found in malls, schools and other public places. Remember that before the 1990s, mosques were not as numerous as they are now.

Yet there is no evidence to suggest there is significant growth in the number of mosques belonging to minority groups, e.g. Shiite,

Ahmadiyah, Tarekat and other Muslim minorities.

Nor is there a significant rise in the number of churches in Indonesia, such as those of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and others.

Why are many so anxious about the construction of places of worship other than their own? Clearly the idea that there is an increase in faiths other than Sunni and rising missionary activities is mythical.

Many scholarly studies have shown this. However, the anxiety and the spread of the myth are not fairytales. They are real.

Keep in mind that the Sunni majority can build a mosque anywhere they choose, any time they want, in any form they desire and without special permission from any authority or the government, even though minority groups are required to obtain permission before building their places of worship. The number of mosques and churches demonstrates this.***

Disbanding Ahmadiyah costs the freedom of the nation

Yogyakarta, September 17, 2010

By the end of Ramadan, Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali promised to bestow a "controversial gift" on Indonesians, a gift that would displease proponents of tolerance, peace and common sense.

That is, after Idul Fitri he will take serious steps to disband Ahmadiyah. The arguments supporting his statement sound obsolete and unfounded. That is, the group violated a 2008 joint ministerial decree and the outdated 1965 anti-blasphemy law. The public knows where these "weak laws" lead us.

As a politician of the PPP (United Development Party) and a former cooperatives and small and medium enterprises minister, Suryadharma Ali's maneuver is not mindless. Genuine motivations behind his effort should be explained.

However, as he will unlikely explain what has really provoked him to lash out at the religious minority, we can only guess.

Take a political drive as the first clue to this puzzle.

As a politician, he needs popularity to enhance the number of

voters for his party. To become the center of the media's attention is of great benefit to him. He is now popular. As soon as you type his name into Google, his statement about disbanding Ahmadiyah will appear in various online publications.

As a party that targets conservative voters, the PPP, which was established in the early years of Soeharto's government, faces the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) as a serious competitor in the political race.

However, the PKS is seemingly building its image as an "open political party" that "makes room" for the values of pluralism and nationalism. This party has seemed to have learned the lesson that Indonesians are not fond of leaning too far to the right. The PKS leaders want to swing the party to the middle, at least in the eyes of the public.

The gambit sounds tactical. The PKS also deserves credit, for educating conservative stakeholders to accept the fact that the party needs to increase the number of voters, regardless of their beliefs and ideologies. Politics is about the voters, in front of whom your principles should be disguised.

However, the strategy also yields risks. Indonesian voters with nationalist sentiments may look at the PKS' move with a measure of skepticism, while loyal voters with conservative and radical minds may leave the party, seeing that the party has betrayed their original ideology.

The PPP, which wants to construct itself as an icon of conservatism, has seized on an opportunity. The Ahmadiyah issue has been chosen to attract potential conservative and radical voters.

If this is the case, short-term political gain has won out over long-term national interest.

Iskandar Zulkarnain, a scholar on Ahmadiyah, wrote that the Islamic sect's contributions to this country and Indonesian Muslims since even before independence, such as translating the Koran into Javanese and other intellectual endeavors, cannot be belittled. Amien Rais also held Ahmadiyah's achievements in the world, such as promoting intellectual Islam in Europe, in high regard.

What is obvious is that in the soil of Indonesia, Ahmadiyah has stood for much longer than those who want to eradicate it.

Ahmadiyah — like NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), Muhammadiyah, the PGI, Kawali, Parisada Hindu Dharma, and other religious groups that have colored the Indonesian canvas with diversity — has contributed to this country much more than those who want to annihilate it.

Ahmadiyah is part of Indonesia. If its members are not allowed to live in this country, which they love as much as we do, where should they go? Should we just throw them into ocean? Or expel them?

There are rows and rows of Indonesian leaders and intellectuals who will side with the "oppressed" Ahmadiyah, as they know that banning Ahmadiyah comes at the cost of the freedom of all Indonesian people.

If Ahmadiyah is disbanded because its teachings are different from Indonesian Shafi'ite Sunni majority, there are more sects and Islamic groups on the list, including Indonesian Hanbalite Sunni, Hanafite Sunni, Shiite, Tarekat groups (e.g. Naqshabandiyah, Satiriyah, Jalaluddin Rumi groups), numerous Islamic local variants, and so on.

Next, if you follow a religion that is different from those the Ministry of Religious Affairs officially acknowledges, be ready to be banned. The same warning rings true for those who embrace different faiths.

Simply put, our fate and freedom is now attached to that of Ahmadiyah. To allow Ahmadiyah to be disbanded means to let us follow the same fate. Here, in Indonesia, we persecute our own brother Muslims.

Let us consult to the speech delivered by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at Harvard University, in which he challenged Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations". Agreed Mr. President! Now a question please. What about clashes among Indonesians?***

The scenario of Shia persecution

Yogyakarta, April 29, 2014

The anti-Shia movement in Indonesia wants to seize the momentum of both the legislative and presidential elections against this Islamic minority. Not only do they intend to attract public attention during their mass gathering in Bandung recently, but they also want to achieve some political goals.

Shia issues, for various conservative and radical groups, are indeed marketable. The louder they shout their hatred against minorities, the more pious they feel.

In November and December 2013, a group called the FJI (Islamic Jihad Front) threatened the Shia intellectual group called Rausan Fikr in Yogyakarta.

In two months, the threat was raised three times. Before they besieged the targeted place, the police warned the victims, who then reduced their activities and dispersed for a while. Clearly the anti-Shia movement Yogyakarta wanted to seize the momentum of the legislative election of April 9.

At the height of the legislative campaign period and the rivalry between Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and Prabowo Subianto, the candidates of the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party for

Struggle) and Gerindra Party respectively, the anti-Shia movement caused another stir with a huge gathering in Bandung, which was attended by 1,000 people to spread hatred once again.

Cholil Ridwan, a conservative clerk and politician, called upon his supporters not to vote for the PDI-P in April or for Jokowi in the July presidential election.

He reminded his followers that Jokowi might appoint a PDI-P legislative candidate, Jalaluddin Rakhmat, a prominent Shiite intellectual, as the religious affairs minister.

It is likely that there are national and local scenarios in the anti-Shia movement.

At the national level, opportunist politicians took advantage of the Shia issue. Apparently, certain leaders of PPP (The United Development Party), which is now recovering from an internal rift primarily caused by chairman Suryadharma Ali's support of Prabowo, played their cards.

One can easily link the embattled party chairman's consistently insensitive attitude toward the Shiites in Sampang, Madura in East Java and his party's similar attitude to the minority. The more politicians express their hate toward minorities, the more support they expect from radicals.

Local politicians have also done their best to garner more support. Like with the case of Sampang, in which rivalries between village politicians came to the surface of the persecution of the Shiites, in Yogyakarta local politicians also wanted to effectively court local radical voters.

According to my interviews with some Shiites and several religious leaders in Yogyakarta, my informants cited a legislative candidate from an Islamic party who had triggered the siege against the Rausan Fikr. This legislative candidate has built mutual relations with radicals.

As an affluent politician, who used to hold the highest position in the city of Yogyakarta, he is quite generous in financing the activities of certain groups. The perpetrators of the intimidation against the Shiites in Yogyakarta still monitor the minority group closely.

Nonetheless, the Bandung gathering of April 20 seemed to be a celebration, rather than a gathering to incite hatred. One can also

see the gathering as a national level consolidation, in the form of the anti-Shia declaration. The actions were executed at local levels, such as in Sampang and Yogyakarta.

However, the planned siege of the Shiites in Yogyakarta failed. Sultan Hamengkubuwono X had guaranteed the safety of the minorities. Some local religious leaders and NGO activists pledged their support to the victims. The anti-Shia movement in Yogyakarta did spread fear but nothing more.

But just be prepared to watch the anti-Shias' next moves in the aftermath of the Bandung gathering, locally and nationally.***

Gafatar attack shows the limits of unity in diversity

Yogyakarta, February 3, 2016

Rubble and charred timber are all that remain of the settlement of former members of Gafatar (The Fajar Nusantara Movement) in Mempawah, West Kalimantan. Two weeks ago, a mob descended on the community, torching their houses and forcing them to flee. The government is now returning the 1,000-plus displaced people to their home villages in Java. The attack is just the latest manifestation of violence against minorities in the reform era.

Gafatar is a new "religious" movement. The word "religious" is, in theory, a broad term and can have a different meaning for different people – it is not defined by any one tradition, group, or sect. "Religious" can of course refer to all traditions that contain spiritual elements, whether mainstream religions with millions of adherents across the globe, or local indigenous religions, followed by only a small group of people in a specific area.

The problem is that the Indonesian state formally recognises just six religions (Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism). It has yet to provide any space for new religious movements like Gafatar, which aim to offer teaching, concepts, or rules to provide solutions not found in the formal

religions.

As most of the Indonesian population is Muslim, most religious issues are understood from the perspective of Islam, or at least the Abrahamic tradition. The government often appears apprehensive or inept when attempting to deal with new religious movements that do not follow the established traditions of the main global religions.

As a country rich in religious and spiritual traditions, religious movements have always played an important part in national life. In Indonesian history, almost all political movements have contained a significant religious element. In the colonial era, for example, Sarekat Islam was crucial for the nascent independence movement. Years later, in the New Order period, major Muslim social organisations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah played a critical role in advocating for democratic reforms. Political parties continue to align themselves with religion in an attempt to attract votes.

Although Gafatar was not well known until recently, its genesis can be traced back to the early reform era and the Al-Qiyadah Al-Islamiyah movement.

Al-Qiyadah Al-Islamiyah was led by Ahmad Mushoddeq and was said to incorporate elements of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. MUI (The Indonesian Ulama Council) published a religious edict (*fatwa*) declaring it to be a deviant sect in 2007 and the following year Ahmad Mushoddeq was sentenced to four years in prison for blasphemy.

Since then, the movement has continued to evolve, and has been called the Milah Abraham movement, and more recently, Gafatar. Leaders of Gafatar say that the movement was disbanded in August 2015,[1] and former members reportedly moved to West Kalimantan a few months ago to establish a food security program.

Gafatar is far from the only new religious movement to emerge in the reform era. A number of new religious movements materialised in the turbulent period following the transition to democracy. The fall of Soeharto in 1998, and the political, economic and social

[1] http://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20160127102151-20-106982/eks-ketua-gafatar-kami-bukan-teroris-kenapa-dimusuhi/

turmoil that accompanied it, provided favourable conditions for the growth of new religious movements. In Jakarta alone, we have seen movements established by HMA Bijak Bestari, Lia Eden, Agus Imam Solihin, and many others. In Cirebon, there was Imam Ahmad Tantowi; in East Java, Ahmad Naf'an (Gus A'an); in Central Java, Raden Suminto Joyo Kusumo; and in West Nusa Tenggara, Amaq Bakri. Indonesia, it seems, is fertile ground for the birth of these new "prophets", all of whom claim to have received divine revelation through a variety of methods.

During the New Order period, new religious movements such as these were grouped together under the broad terms *aliran kepercayaan* or *aliran kebatinan* ("faith-based movements"). Under Soeharto, these groups survived, although their followers lived with fear and marginalisation, facing repression by the government and prejudice from society. Many of these *aliran* were recognised not as religions but as mere sects, and put under the umbrella of one of five official religions acknowledged by the government at that time.

Ironically, these groups have found it even harder to exist following the transition to democracy in 1998. Many of the leaders of these new religious movements have been charged with blasphemy under Law No. 1 PNPS/1965 (the Blasphemy Law), which inserted an article on blasphemy into the Criminal Code. There has, in fact, been a significant increase in the use of the Blasphemy Law in the democratic era. While it was only used a handful of times in the New Order period, more than 120 people have been convicted for blasphemy since the fall of Soeharto.[2]

In addition to facing criminal charges, some new religious movements have been attacked by hard-line Islamic groups. The reform period has seen a rise in the number and influence of violent Islamist groups seeking to uphold orthodoxy and crack down on behaviour that they consider immoral. They often justify their violent and intolerant actions by referring to MUI fatwa that brand these new religious movements as deviant or heretic.

Culture and traditions across this archipelagic nation are complex, plural and dynamic. As long as Indonesians remain a pious people oriented toward religion, new religious movements

[2] http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb146_0.pdf

that seek to distinguish themselves from the mainstream will continue to emerge. It is a natural consequence of having such a diverse society. Both the government and Indonesian citizens need to accept this fact. The birth and expansion of new religious movements cannot be stopped with repression or marginalisation, including by prosecution through the legal system. Suppressing one movement will only lead to others emerging to take its place.

As a country that claims to live by the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), it is time for Indonesia to reassess what it means by diversity. During the New Order period, *bhinneka* was understood as providing room for different faiths. But the Soeharto government failed to acknowledge the massive diversity of religious traditions in Indonesia. Tolerance was understood as tolerance for the official religions. Faith-based movements had no legal protection.

There are more than 600 religious traditions in Indonesia – not just six. It is the responsibility of the current generation to understand and protect this diversity, including protecting new religious movements. The meaning of *bhinneka* should be revisited and broadened to encompass all religious traditions — be they official or new religious movements.

There is nothing to be gained from judging or stigmatising Gafatar just because its beliefs diverge from the mainstream. Gafatar and its followers must be treated with humanity, just as any other Indonesian would expect to be treated. All citizens are equal before the law, whether they are from a new religious movement or one of the six formal religions.***

(*Translated by Tim Mann; a shorter version of this piece was published in Jawa Pos as "Ketika Toleransi Tak Lagi Cukup" on 28 January 2016.*)

CHAPTER TWO
ISLAMIC RELIGIOSITY

Are there any Indonesian prophets?

Montreal, February 13, 2009

Agus Imam Sholihin – like Lia Aminuddin (the founder of the Salamullah Eden community), Ahmad Mushoddeq (the founder of the "deviant sect" al-Qiyadah al-Islamiyah) and many other Indonesian "false prophets" – claimed divinity and founded a weird religious cult.

Solichin declared himself the reincarnation of Sukarno, a prophet and finally God. To magnify his claims, Solichin took the following grandeur titles *Satria Piningit Weteng Buwana* (the knight hidden in the belly of the earth) and *Agus Nata Sukarno Putra* (Agus, the son of Sukarno in charge). What bold and eccentric claims!

In the beginning, Solichin behaved like an ordinary Islamic sect leader. He advocated that his followers perform Islamic rites, encouraging them to prayer five times every day and to fast during the month of Ramadan, among other things. However, it seems that he could not control his wild mind and confidence. He demanded his followers conduct sexual intercourse in front of him, as reported by some media.

Déja vu as it may sound; Agus Solichin was faced with no different end from those of Aminuddin and Moshaddeq. His claim

upset people, particularly religious leaders. Solichin then sought police custody, for the sake of his own safety. The MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) and Bakor Pakem (The Coordinating Board for Monitoring Mystical Beliefs in Society) denounced Solichin's cult. In court, Solichin is likely to face two separate charges: Sexual harassment and blasphemy.

Many followed suit, blaming Solichin's deviant behaviors and questioning the soundness of his mind, as shown in many personal blogs. However, the authority found him neither insane nor mentally ill. He is a normal person.

Rather than insulting Agus' declaration and attacking his dignity, let us ask ourselves why many Indonesians claim to be prophets nowadays, in the postmodern era? Is there anything wrong with those who claim prophethood?

A more profound question is also worth asking: Why was no "official" prophet born in Indonesia and recorded in any scriptures?

In fact, many prophets, whose guidance Indonesians earnestly followed, and many religions Indonesians officially embraced, were imported from other countries and cultures a long time ago.

Hinduism and Buddhism, which resiliently influenced Indonesian cultures and traditions, came from India. Islam, which has gained the majority of followers in the country, was born in Hijaz, Saudi Arabia. Arabic and Indian traders brought it to the archipelago. Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, was originally brought by Dutch and Portuguese missionaries.

Given this, have any indigenous religions and/or prophets emerged from our land?

Yes, many Indonesian prophets were — and will be — born on our land, as long as we are sincere enough to acknowledge their prophethood and place their names in the "chain" of world prophets. Historically speaking, the birth of this nation was impossible without a prophet. Similarly, without the guardianship of prophets, this nation would have collapsed long ago.

Thus, prophets must have ushered us to the right paths during the time of struggle, development and reformation.

However, it appears that many of us were not prepared to appreciate the prophethood of our own fellows.

If we show our own prophets little respect, we shouldn't expect their continuous birth and reincarnation. At the same time, the emergence of some "weird" prophets – like Aminuddin, Moshaddeq, and Solichin – is not surprising. A good society gives birth to good prophets; an ugly society delivers ugly ones.

Historians and anthropologists told us that Indonesia never runs out of claimants of divinity. Saints (*wali*) and soothsayers (*dukun*) are not uncommon in our legends, sagas and myths. During the period of struggle for independence, many soothsayers claimed they were immune from any weapons (*sakti*).

They also promised that they could give spiritual protection to young men wanting to join the Indonesian army in battles.

We also find the same story in several turbulences occurring in the country. The 1965 upheaval and the crisis after the fall of Soeharto were no exception. Yet prophethood, notwithstanding its relation to divinity and spirituality, is something else. What is clear is our society needs more true prophets. Yet we have a score of politicians who have used religious sentiments to gain the public's sympathy.

A score of religious leaders, on the other hand, are prepared to seize any political opportunity when it comes. The voices of actual pundits, however, remain unheard.

Some prophets, or a prophet, must be there. Their miraculous wisdom is what we expect as guidance in facing this global downturn. ***

More Prophets are Needed in Today's Indonesia

Heidelberg, October 11, 2007

In a similar outcome to the Ahmadiyah and Lia Aminuddin cases, The MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) last week issued fatwa (edict) No. 4/2007 against the newly born Islamic sect Qiyadah Islamiyah, led by Haji Salam (alias Ahmad Mushoddeq), in Bogor.

In the past we have seen numerous intellectuals and scholars voicing passionate criticism of MUI's fatwas, including Azyumardi Azra, Dawam Rahardjo, Komaruddin Hidayat, Djohan Effendi, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Abdul Moqsith Ghazali, Weinata Sairin, Ahmad Syafi'i Ma'arif, Anan Krishna and Abdurrachman Wahid, to name a few.

For the sake of brevity, we shall not repeat each argument here. Suffice it to say that these intellectuals are -- in the name of pluralism, freedom of faith and religious tolerance -- concerned that these edicts trigger religious violence against the Ahmadiyah and Eden or Salamullah sects. Indeed, both Ahmadiyah and Salamullah were physically attacked by radical groups. Peculiarly, Lia Aminuddin was even jailed. Thus, Abdul Moqsith Ghazali writes that the MUI

edicts have a "criminalization" effect on their subjects.

Interestingly, the basis of these criticisms does not accord with MUI's point of view, since MUI itself condemns liberalism, secularism and pluralism. Unsurprisingly, rather than listening to these voices, MUI has repeated the same edicts.

The main question here is whether with the pronouncement of these edicts MUI will reach its goal; to eradicate "deviant" sects from Islamic orthodoxy. Realistically speaking, there are no guarantees whatsoever that condemning, discrediting, banning, attacking and jailing cult leaders will diminish their faith, or end their religious activity. To illustrate, if a cult is banned, its leader jailed and followers persecuted, will another cult not emerge in its place? Nobody dares say no. Apart from controversy and concerns surrounding possible persecution against the Qiyadah Islamiyah by certain radical groups, one may wonder why claimants of prophethood still emerge in modern Indonesia, at least in the cases of Lia Aminuddin and Haji Salam who have made particular use of the idioms of Islamic doctrine.

It is worth recalling that in the history of Semitic prophethood, in ancient times prophets played an essential role in advocating reform for the betterment of society. However, it seems hard if not impossible to apply such a theory to Indonesian claimants, while we remain a majority and are satisfied with the establishment.

Worse still, they are often seen as deviants and heretics, as Muslims hold there is no prophet after "the Seal of the Prophets/khatam anbiya,"--the Prophet Muhammad. Accusations that Salamullah and Qiyadah are guilty of murtad (apostasy) in borrowing Islamic terms to express their teachings may gain justification. Moreover, radical groups could easily use this to justify their actions.

However, if we use the emergence of these claimants as a point of departure for further contemplation, we are reminded to practice self-criticism as a religious society.

Thus, we can perhaps ask ourselves: Are there any weaknesses in our official religions, where new cults may emerge? Have our religious leaders behaved appropriately? Do official religions still serve to function for the betterment of our society? Do they still

function to guard our nation's morality?

With these questions in mind, may we humbly avoid judging these people as claiming prophethood for the sake of popularity and fame.

It may well be that these new claimants offer only ancient or medieval concepts of prophethood -- apparently sharing the same views on revelation, salvation and messianism as their ancient predecessors did. But we should avoid the old prejudices and hostile attitudes in judging them. Many ancient prophets first faced persecution from their own societies, so we should learn from history, not repeat this mistake with new claimants.

Following Abdurrachman Wahid's principle, let the people think and determine for themselves what new cults may offer. Azyumardi Azra also reminds us that the interpretations of religion held by a majority are not the sole truth, or that we can force the rest to follow. It may be true that we no longer need prophets in an ancient sense with regard to their charisma and leadership, as the latter role has partly been taken over by modern but secular institutions -- such as governments, political parties, intellectuals and even religious leaders (as heirs of past prophets and guardians of official religions).

Thus, the declaration in ancient times of prophethood and new religion has been replaced, in terms of leadership, by modern presidential candidates or the formation of political parties. Claims of revelation and the establishment of new religious teachings has been replaced by new ideologies or schools of thought.

Regardless, with the current situation the way it is, in Indonesia we do need more prophets -- in the modern sense. Needless to say, Indonesians still fail to carry out their most important duties as a nation and society. That is, to cooperate in the fight against corruption inherent in our culture and mentality, to guard the nation against disintegration, to uphold the rule of law and, finally, to escape from a multi-dimensional crisis. In this respect, we expect and hope more prophets come and stand boldly, leading the people (*ummah*) to voice the truth.***

Indonesians really need to have a Noah's Ark'

Bochum, October 08, 2009

Indonesians take religion and faith in God seriously. Thus, it is worth pondering for a moment to relate the current series of natural catastrophes - e.g. earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions - to religious traditions.

Religion in its very early form, according to those who study theology, had to do with nature. Religion, for those who hold the spirit of "positivism" under the light of European Enlightenment, served as an answer for humans to solve mysteries related to nature.

Religion was an early form of "science", which at least fulfilled the needs of human curiosity and, more importantly, of salvation.

It is therefore unsurprising that various early religious texts preserve the stories of natural disasters which involve God's intervention in human affairs. The relationship of man and God is often overshadowed by nature.

The Old Testament and the Koran are no exception to this, as various verses of both tell us that the concepts of God and nature are undivorceable.

The Koran clearly says on many occasions that nature itself

stands for the sign of the existence and the greatness of God, which are as sacred as the Scripture itself. Thus, we should respect nature as carefully as we do the Bible and the Koran.

Let us recall here the great story of the Flood, which both the Bible and the Koran perpetuate. This account is even found in the older Sumerian and Babylonian texts. The Athrahasis epic, for example, tells us the deluge was caused by gods who were disturbed by the noises made by humans. However, the god Enki betrayed the plan, by revealing it to the hero, Athrahasis, who then constructed an ark to save humans.

Table eleven of the Gilgamesh records its own version. It is said that Gilgamesh, the king who sought immortality, met the hero Utnapistim, who had survived the deluge, and who then told the "secret" to the king.

Not only do the Old Testament and the Koran refer to the same hero, Noah, the two Scriptures also highlight the moral lesson behind the Flood, which is said to have been caused by the sinful deeds of man. The Koran particularly stresses that man's ignorance toward the truth brought by Noah led to God's punishment.

However, the current natural catastrophes in Indonesia should not be related to the people's sins. Do not blame us too much, for we are now in trouble. In addition, pointing at who is responsible and whom we should blame is not a solution.

It is irrelevant if the current earthquake which hit Padang - and others which previously hit Yogyakarta and Tasikmalaya - has to do with a lack of piety on the part of the local people. Nor does the tsunami, which befell Aceh, relate to the people's sins.

What is important is to build an ark to salvage the nation, as Athrahasis, Utnapistim, and Noah did as examples.

Once again, Indonesians now need an ark, which passengers can board to find salvation. The ark, however, should not be built from gopher wood, with the "length of three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits *Gen. 6: 15*." We should not interpret this message literally, particularly with regard to the Indonesian context. However, the ark should be built upon faith, science and morality. Faith here does not necessarily mean institutionalized "religions." Again, literal meanings should be avoided.

Rather, we should use our own pluralistic religious traditions, which are strongly rooted in Indonesian society, as capital to construct the ark. Instead of bringing religion into the public realm and using it as a means to achieve political goals, it is better now to use our faith in our own traditions as a foundation in building the boat.

Bear in mind that stoning the adulterer to death in the name of religion will harm our faith and traditions. Hijacking religion and bringing it into the political arena, as the result of our last general election has taught us, has yielded political distrust. Indeed, it did not surprise us that political parties using religious sentiments were defeated.

Violence in the name of religion will make religious people victims in the first place, for associating their religion with that violence. Now, do not repeat the same mistake. Do not fall into the same trap.

Thus, we should return our faith in our own religious tradition to our basic need, namely salvation, which is a psychological and private matter. Utnapistim, Athrahasis and Noah served as leaders, building arks to save their fellow humans.

Now, our current political leaders should shoulder this responsibility. They must be aware that building the ark with faith, science and morality is never an easy task.

Like Noah in the Bible and the Koran, the current newly elected leaders should set good examples to the people. When The Flood comes, they should show courage and not be afraid of getting wet. When the earthquake hits, they should give shelter to the victims. With this series of natural disasters, and perhaps with more to come, Indonesian leaders need to prepare the ark, which should connect the three important components: man, nature and God.***

World's most powerful book

Yogyakarta, September 28, 2010

I found the expression "*Der Koran — Das mächtigste Buch der Welt*" — which means "The Koran, the most powerful book in the world" — in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* No. 52, year 2007. As many said, the phrase, which lampoons the way in which the Koran is still predominantly regarded in "conventional" Muslim theology until today, is indeed provocative.

Of course, this Holy Scripture — like any other scripture belonging to any other religion — literally can do nothing to defend itself from any "blasphemous acts" that befall it.

The believers, who always serve as the guardians of the truth contained by the scripture, will keenly and earnestly do anything to "infl ict punishment" upon those who intentionally harm the one-and-half-millennium-old book's reputation.

One verse in the scripture says that God has sent down the scripture, the content and "truth" of which He Himself will always guard. In fact, believers feel that they are entrusted by God to take any necessary action, whenever its authority is questioned.

No scripture in the world has so high a status in the theological system, which has survived until today, as the Koran, whose every

letter, word, sentence, verse and chapter is protected by angels.

Every believer must hold that a change had never occurred in the content and language of the cripture for 15 centuries. For them, it is simply the greatest miracle revealed by the Prophet Muhammad.

The expression evoked by *Der Spiegel* is relevant in order to recall the way the threat of burning the Koran by Terry Jones and his group was cancelled, substituted instead by tearing a few pages of the Koran — rather like in the movie *Fitna* produced by a controversial member of the Dutch parliament, Geertz Wilders, with the sound of the tearing of a page of the Koran. These are the boldest "blasphemous acts" they could possibly commit.

Attempting any more than that, you will bear the consequences personally. Never dare trespass on the boundaries, which are all set, crystalclear, in Muslim theology until today.

Condemnation is not enough. Violent demonstrations menaced, and death threats were received.

Indeed, the Koran is the most powerful book on earth — power that Terry Jones and his group actually experienced.

In fact, compared to the Old Testament, whose origins can be traced back to long and complex traditions centuries before Christ, the Koran is much younger. Compared to the New Testament, the Koran is at least 5 centuries younger. And both Old and New Testaments have suffered serious criticism from their own believers. Jewish and Christian scholars, including theologians, have looked at their own Scriptures with historical perspectives and critical viewpoints.

The Koran, however, is always seen from a theological perspective. The words of God, which were sent down to earth to guide humanity to act in accordance with the rules of God, are read loudly, remembered by heart, and interpreted in many ways.

The power of the Koran is enormous. Almsgiving and kindness to other human beings and all other creatures are motivated by the Koran. However, to tear down skyscrapers, to blow up airplanes, and to stab someone in the chest, the perpetrators justify their acts with Koranic verses.

The Scripture's power can be felt by many, who, however, can do either virtuous or evil deeds.

There are critical Muslim intellectuals whose endeavors to reform the conventional belief in, and treatment of, the Koran never receive a significant number of adherents among Muslims.

Their views are responded to positively only by certain elite Muslim and Western intellectuals. To spread their teachings is another challenge.

An Egyptian, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who fled from his homeland after being accused of apostasy by his own Egyptian fellows, and Algerian Mohammed Arkoun, whose distinguished scholarly career was accomplished at the Sorbonne, both passed away this year.

The two attempted to put the tex tof the Koran into its historical context and promoted its humanistic sides. The conventional understanding of the Scripture begs more revisions.

In Indonesian Islamic scholarship, the two professors received a warm welcome. The students of both called upon us to see the text of the Koran from an open-minded perspective.

Unfortunately, conservative writers stabbed the progressive Indonesian Muslims in the back. Their ideas were distorted in the public media. Their reputations were blackened. The "black and white" mode of thinking, which is simple and easy to understand, prevails. Too complicated and complex views of the Koran have gained no significant number of supporters.

The old perception of the Koran still lingers in Indonesia, and in the Muslim world. Many obstacles stand on the path to reformation. The holy book remains "untouched" by believers and unbelievers.***

Islam without veil

Yogyakarta, July 27, 2010

Since the recent controversy surrounding the French government's ban on total face coverings (*burqa* or *niqab*), the head scarf issue has once again attracted the world's attention.

Indeed, only very few Muslim women cover their face completely, which is a reflection of the attitude preached by Sayed al Tantawi, an imam of Al-Azhar in Cairo, who boldly stated that total face coverings are not in accordance with Islamic teachings.

It is therefore not surprising that the education ministry in Syria, a Muslim majority country, has also issued a ban on niqab in all state and private universities.

Looking at classical Islamic literature, one will discover that this piece of cloth was never a serious subject of discussion among Muslim jurists, historians, philosophers, theologians nor any other thinkers.

There are much more important issues to discuss than paying attention to whether women's heads should be covered or left bare.

The headscarf issue, which has served a symbol of new Islamic revivalism, is new.

The Koran itself never explicitly mentions that women should cover their hair. Nor is there clear guidance on what parts of

women's bodies should be covered with what kind of cloth.

Covering women's heads with only their faces showing, is part of more recent Islamic conservatism, which has recently penetrated almost all aspects of Indonesian Muslims' lives.

Indonesian women, however, have proven themselves to be creative in making the veil into more of a fashion statement that a symbol of conservatism.

Girls in campuses and malls have combined the article with modern trends. Ironically, some headscarf clad women can be found wearing trendy outfits accentuating the female form.

Those who are in favor of wearing hijab head scarves justify their ideology, which they consider as a religious duty, by exploiting the interpretation of verses 33:59 and 24:31 of the Koran.

The remainder of the argument rests on unclear Prophetic traditions in the Hadith, whose meanings are then violated. The contexts are forgotten and their main messages are abandoned. The focus of attention is paid to whether there is a piece of cloth covering a woman's head. They are selective in choosing the part of the tradition that supports their argument.

We may question why they are so concerned with two verses out of more than 6,000 verses in 114 chapters of the Koran. Six years ago in Ciputat, Tangerang, Banten, in a conversation my colleague, Prof. Abdullah Saeed, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia, wondered that Muslims did not pay enough attention to the prohibition of lying which occurs in almost every chapter of the Koran.

Paradoxically, the unclear message of wearing head scarves in only two verses of the whole Scripture becomes a heated subject of debate among Muslims.

Of course, wearing a headscarf is neither a theme of philosophical nor of theological discussion. It can perhaps be inserted in Islamic law, although its place is marginal. Head scarves are certainly items of modern fashion that have become prevalent in Muslim communities.

"Looking at classical Islamic literature, one will discover that this piece of cloth was never a serious subject of discussion among Muslim jurists, nor any other thinkers."

It is of course a product of culture. Studies show that many

women have their own various reasons to wear a headscarf — be they religious, personal, or fashionable. Additionally, wearing a headscarf is obligated by certain institutions, supported by parents, or friends.

On the other hand, covering head is also an old tradition, older than Islam itself. Images of women covering their heads have been found connected to Egyptian, Sumerian, Greek and Byzantine cultures.

Many classical works show that important female figures, such as the Virgin Mary, covered their heads with cloth. Note that men also wore headscarves — a fashion which is less popular now, except in the Arab countries.

Indonesian thinkers, i.e. Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrachman Wahid "Gus Dur", whom we should be proud of, warned us that we should distinguish between the spirit of Islam and Arab culture, the context in which Islam was born. Sukarno, when he was young, once condemned the segregation of men and women in public forums.

In understanding Islam, Sukarno often called upon Indonesians to take the fire (the spirit), not the ashes (unessential elements).

Without doubt, the headscarf issue is not the fire. It is a part of recent revivalism whose advocates adopted the headscarf as a symbol and "identity", indicating their unpreparedness in facing the challenge of globalization. They are worried of being lost in the wilds of the global market and feel the need to distinguish themselves.

Since the 1990s in Indonesia, the veil has dominated the public and at times buried our "identity". In campuses, streets, supermarket, vehicles, the hijab has become a trend.

Fewer people wear traditional ethnic clothes even in ceremonies. We often see weddings with grooms and brides who preferred "religious dresses" to traditional ethnic garb.

In fact, to wear veil, or not to wear veil, does not indicate the quality of our piety. It is purely fashion. Traditionally, Indonesian Islam was never hidden behind a veil.***

Tales from the Holy Land

Yogyakarta, March 16, 2011

In Indonesia, religious piety has become a public norm. Indonesian Muslims pray five times a day, fast during Ramadhan, and perform pilgrimage (haj) to the holy land, Hijaz, a province in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, once or more in their lifetime.

No Indonesian Muslim dares to say in public that he or she has intentionally abandoned these Islamic religious rites. Those who are accused of ignoring these religious duties are usually branded as Islam KTP (Muslim by ID card). This is a form of contempt.

Mecca and Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad was born and passed away respectively, are regarded as sacrosanct. The Indonesian Muslims regard the two cities, which play a central role in their religiosity, in high regard. The Kabah in Mecca is the one direction which Muslims face during daily prayers.

During Ramadhan many TV and radios stations broadcast the tarawih (evening) prayers from the Prophet's Medina mosque. The audience watches and listens the program attentively.

During the haj season, many Indonesian Muslims sacrifice their properties — land, savings, farm animals, or anything else that can be sold — in order to pay for their journey to the holy land. Many Muslims have a dream of making a pilgrimage to the sacred shrines of the Prophet, regarded as a spiritual achievement.

Back home, the pictures of the Kabah and the Prophet's mosque are often hung on the wall.

Besides ritual purposes, not only do Indonesians go to the holy land to seek for knowledge at the universities, they also go to find jobs. In terms of numbers, we export more migrant workers than scientists or students.

However, the tales from the holy land are not always wonderful. The image of the sacred cities has been tainted by some accounts of tragic events that have befallen Indonesian migrant workers.

Last year, Sumiati, a domestic worker from West Nusa Tenggara, was tortured. Her suffering was described to have been worse than "slavery" (*The Jakarta Post*, Nov. 18, 2010). More detailed accounts, which are too horrible to be recounted here, are abundant on the Internet.

Various Indonesian media reported that many Indonesian workers are stranded under the bridge in Jeddah. Their dream of finding work in the holy land ended up in such a place where they stayed during the days and nights. Some were then sent home.

Eny Binti Katma, a domestic worker from Sukabumi, West Java, who was accused of killing a baby, faces the death penalty. So does Darsem from Subang West Java, who was charged with the murder of his master, who wanted to rape her.

Beheading is a common practice in Saudi Arabia, which has a record in discrimination against women, religious minorities and human rights violations, among which are those related to the abuse of Indonesian domestic workers. The DPR (House of Representatives) Speaker Marzuki Alie once put it that "the torture has humiliated us as a nation" (*The Jakarta Post*, Nov. 20, 2010).

The holy status of Hijaz should not prevent the Indonesian Muslims, and particularly the government, from speaking of what befell their fellow citizens abroad. In the name of humanity and human rights a concrete step should be taken to save Darsem from execution and to prevent similar violence from occurring. To deal with the issue, besides collecting coins to pay the ransom of death penalty, as "Migrant Care" Indonesia did, diplomatic and political pressure should be on the table.

Yes, Arabic is a sacred language, by which God in the Scripture speaks to us. Muslims believe that an angle guards every Arabic

letter. But, not all of those who speak the language, like some of us, commit good deeds. Some, just like some of us, violate the divine law.

Although the Muslims' direction of prayers is the Kabah in Mecca, it is hard to take the holy land as an example of democracy and human rights. By contrast, whereas other Muslim countries, such as Turkey and Indonesia, have advanced in blending democracy, secularization, and local Islamic characters, the kingdom remains kingdom.

An ongoing wave of democratic protests in the Middle East has hit Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya. The sacred land remains sacred.***

Islam and dictatorship

Yogyakarta, March 03, 2011

Whether or not Islam is compatible with democracy is a misleading question. Islam and democracy are two different entities, although both cannot be divorced when dealing with politics in the Muslim world.

In Indonesia, for instance, Islam and Muslims are two themes that cannot be ignored, from the period of the country's independence to the era of reformation. The same rings true in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other Middle Eastern countries. Islam and politics are interwoven.

Islam, like any other religion, is an old system of beliefs. Democracy is a new advancement of a modern political system. Each can complement the other. Collision between the two can also occur.

Those who apologetically insist that Islam teaches democracy and those who cynically reject the compatibility of democracy and Islam treat the religion as a monolithic entity. Both sides see Islam as one religion embraced by the same Muslims in many different countries and generations. They all disregard many other aspects, such as culture and economy, which of course play the same important role as religion does in society. Equally interesting is that the two sides see Islam and Muslims, the teachings and the people,

the religion and its adherents, as the same.

In fact, Islam cannot be defined easily, as this religion has been present for a long time and has been embraced by various Muslims at different times and in different areas. All interpreted Islam uniquely and differently from each other.

It is true that the Muslim world has produced many dictators, from Sukarno, Soeharto, Saddam Hussein, Zine El-Abidine ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak to Muammar Qaddafi. Authoritarian regimes with traditional Sunni and Shiite theocratic systems still prevalently rule Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East.

The question now is does Islam teach dictatorship?

Cynics argue that dictatorship is inherent in both Islamic history and texts. Early and later caliphs in numerous Islamic dynasties ruled the people without democratic principles. They simply justified their absolute political power with religious dogma, ignoring the people's voice. However, to judge history with a modern point of view is misleading too, as democracy was not yet invented at that time.

Those who contend that Islam prohibits despotism will extract some messages from both the Koran and prophetic tradition, which can be interpreted in a certain way, so much so that the modern concept of democracy is found in the texts. Indonesian Muslim leaders, from Mohammad Natsir, Agus Salim, Sukarno to Nurcholish Madjid, took this path.

Once again, religion is not the sole factor that can be blamed for what happens in society.

In fact, many pundits suggested that the current people's movement in the Middle East that dethroned Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt mainly consists of a post-Islamic generation. The extent to which Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, played a role in the protests seems minor.

The sufferings shared by the common people, disregarding their ideology and schools of thought, under tyrannical rulers became the main impulse of the peaceful democratic demonstrations.

As in Indonesia in 1997, in the current Middle Eastern euphoria the people's eagerness to topple despotic regimes was not stimulated merely by Islamic religious sentiment. Nor did religious radicalism or Western intervention inspire the people to do so, as

Qaddafi accused his own people.

However, in the aftermath of the old regimes' fall, Islamists are ready to throw their hat in the political arena. This faction, like any other faction with different ideologies, wants to participate in the ballots.

As in the case of Indonesia, after Soeharto's downfall, Islamism, after having been suppressed by militaristic means during the New Order, seized the opportunity to revive. However, political distrust hampered political parties with Islamist agendas, which never gained a significant number of votes.

Indonesians preferred secular parties, which, unfortunately, are not bold enough to declare themselves as secular.

If Islam does not teach either democracy or dictatorship clearly, Islamism is ready to impose ideological tenets upon Muslims. The post-Islamic generation should be prepared to face them.***

Comparing football to religion

Heidelberg, Montreal, July 04, 2008

Over the past few weeks in Jakarta, politicians and religious leaders have been touting the role of religion in creating peace and dialogue. But in Germany, particularly in Mannheim and Heidelberg, all talks have revolved around football. Interestingly enough, the quarterfinal and semifinal matches in the Euro 2008 championship coincided with the second World Peace Forum in Jakarta, hosted by the second largest Muslim organization in Indonesia: Muhammadiyah.

Also interesting to note is both football and religion seem to drive people into a certain fervor. Harking back to the forum and the football, religious issues hold as much interest for many Indonesians as football issues do for many Germans.

Comparing religion and football might seem sacrilege at first, especially for those who view all aspects of religion as sacred in comparison to football, which to them is merely a pastime. However, it is worth contemplating the similarities.

Since they were conceived, religions have permeated into almost all layers of organization in society, including politics and the economy. And in present-day Indonesia, religion cannot

be separated from the political or economic problems facing the country.

Football, similarly, has played an important role in today's society, particularly here in Europe. It is not a mere game, but a game involving true professionalism and management. Football, of course, has to do with life and money, and more importantly, with organizational skills.

In addition, TV football analysts are religiously heeded and their witty commentary repeated ad nauseum in offices and bars the day after the match. Much in the same way religious clerics are idolized and their (not so) sage words help up as shining beacons of righteousness.

Football players, too, must be as pious as pilgrims in obeying the rules of the game, otherwise they get penalized by the almighty Ref. The spectators watch with a seriousness akin to that of religious scholars reciting scriptures, afraid to miss the smallest detail.

Finally, fanatic loyalty to any football club is no less intense than faith in any religion. Football fans spend money on replica T-shirts or donations for a new stadium, while religious people spend money on prayer clothes or donations for a new mosque or church.

But can football really replace religion in people's lives? No, or at least not in Indonesia. Yet those who claim to be pious or religious could learn a few things about nationalism, tolerance and maturity from football fans.

Football in Germany is a unifying force for nationalism, particularly among the youth. This becomes evident not only during a game, but also before and after it. German flags abound, held aloft by youths chanting "*Deutschland! Deutschland!*". When Germany defeated Italy and Turkey, euphoria bubbled over. When Germany lost to Spain in the final, gloom and resignation settled like a thick fog. And in this despair, the faithful draped their flags around their bodies.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, religious radicalism has clearly eroded any sense of nationalism. Results from countless surveys indicate many Indonesian Muslims have a warped understanding of sharia law. And sharia is now frequently touted as a viable replacement for the state ideology of Pancasila.

Two Indonesian lawyers -- heaven forbid there are more -- believe in this twisted form of sharia. One of them is a regular on the TV circuit, while the other is in police custody. Ironically, these miscreants, responsible for safeguarding Indonesian law, have declared Pancasila is not an official state ideology as set out in the Constitution. Instead, the blessing of the One God (*Rahmat Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*), this lawyer argues, is the foundation of the country. What he means is, of course, his own interpretation of God.

In stark contrast to most Indonesians, most Germans accept defeat honorably. It is almost a certainty when Jakarta's football club loses, for their fans to run amok, accusing officials or the football association of being unfair. In Germany, I heard many fans gently murmur: "*Sie verdient...*" (the Spanish team deserves it...), an expression also found in many daily newspapers. I also heard: "*Das ist nur ein Spiel, oder*?" (It's only a game, isn't it?).

Compare the attitude of German football supporters to that of the FPI (Islam Defenders Front), whose members face trial after attacking another group in the name of religion. The leader of the FPI has made numerous TV appearances in which he blamed the victims for the violence. Equally ironic is the inordinate number of public figures who visited him. One even offered him a position as a legislative candidate for his party in the next general election. It takes one to know one, right?

All things considered, football fans are so much more mature, tolerant and honest than certain religious thugs. However, establishing a good football team is much more expensive and requires more paperwork than founding a radical religious group, for which the only prerequisite is a tendency for hooliganism, intolerance and hypocrisy.***

Good and bad religious leaders

Yogyakarta, January 21, 2011

We Indonesians regard religion as vital in our life. It is difficult to imagine life without religion here. If you are frustrated when faced with harsh reality (judicial mafia, corrupt bureaucrats and irresponsible dishonest politicians), where do you go to cry out for hope?

Most Indonesians have a subtle answer — praying rooms, be they mosques, churches, viharas, temples, or any other places where you can convey all of your discontent. Unsurprisingly, musallas (prayer rooms) are mushrooming in shopping malls, offices, stations and other public places.

Perhaps building many musallas is aimed at anticipating whenever, and wherever, reality does not side with people, they will easily come to the places and pray.

As religion still plays a crucial role in Indonesian society, so do religious leaders. Indonesians still listen to their religious advice not only in ceremonies and rites but also in the media. Preachers appear regularly on TV, radio, and news portals. Their speeches are recorded on CDs, flash disks and even YouTube.

Religious leaders — ulema, priests, bikhu or any other preachers

— occupy a special place in Indonesian society. Politicians are aware of this. Regent, governor, or presidential candidates want to appear in the media, accompanied by religious leaders. If not, they should look pious, wearing traditional black caps (*kopiah*) and collarless white shirts (*baju koko*). To show piety is a gambit that politicians must comply with, if they want to win the people's sympathy.

As for religious leaders in this country, there are many kinds. It depends on how you categorize them and it is based on what criteria the categorization is.

On the ground of popularity, there are two groups: Popular and unpopular religious leaders. The first category is preachers who often appear in the media and public and therefore gain fame. For them, being famous is capital, which can be bargained for both to their political and financial advantage. The second category is those who avoid crowds in order to contemplate religiously and deeply. Whatever they say results from a deep exercise of the mind.

On the basis of official position, religious leaders are divided into two categories: Those who hold positions in religious organization and those who do not. Due to their influential role in the society, in the eyes of politicians, these religious leaders are important.

The formal religious leaders are invited by the politicians whenever the latter need the former's justification and religious authority to legitimize certain political decisions. The second group comprises religious leaders who avoid any official position and are afraid of too big responsibility. They, however, speak of the reality honestly, no matter how bitter it is, and whether or not it would please politicians.

From the perspective of politics, we can draw two categories — political and non-political religious leaders. The first groups those who easily utter verses of the Scripture to support a certain political stance or to please politicians, their counterparts.

These religious leaders often show their religious authority. And, via religious edicts, they easily brand certain products or conducts as *haram* (forbidden) and *halal* (allowed). The second group consists of religious leaders who do not want to waste too many "sacred words". Instead, they set virtuous conduct for the people. These leaders avoid politics and any political bargain with

politicians.

From the standpoint of morality, and ethical criteria, we can perhaps also simplify two groups: Those who are dishonest and honest leaders. The first comprises religious leaders whose intention is political gain. They often maneuver when political opportunities arise.

One can perhaps say that they are opportunists, as whatever opportunity comes they seize it as quickly as they can. Then, they will exploit their popularity in the media for political bargain. The second group is made of religious leaders who tell the truth and do not seek any political reward either from politicians or society. Their honesty is demonstrated in their siding with the weak and oppressed.

You can also propose other criteria and divide religious leaders in this country, if you like. However, do not apply too strict standards, as categories may overlap each other. Be ready for religious leaders with unclear positions, which can be moved from one category to another.

Now support religious leaders who promote inter-religious dialogue but come under the threat of both hardliners and the local authority in East Java. Hail those who bravely unmask 10 dishonesties committed by the Yudhoyono government. Of course, there are religious leaders who defend the President blindly in radio and TV interviews. Do not forget those who move from one category to another, depending on which position offers more political advantages.***

From traditional Ulema to modern Intellectuals

Heidelberg, May 31, 2007

Religious Affairs Minister Maftuh Basyuni recently criticized Indonesia's kyai (Muslim clerics) for their deep involvement in politics at the cost of the quality of Islamic education. The minister voiced his criticism when opening a meeting of the RMI (Islamic Boarding Schools Association) in Jakarta.

"Some Muslim clerics prefer to be involved in politics rather than becoming educators ... and as a result, religion-based education in the pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) has become somewhat disorganized," *The Jakarta Post* reported the minister as saying in its May 19 edition.

The government and political parties often use Muslim clerics for political purposes as they have big followings at the grassroots level. For the clerics, such relationships benefit them politically and, quite often, financially also.

One may venture to say that the traditional role of the kyai in setting moral standards have lately been overshadowed by their political involvement. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that their fatwas are often no longer divorced from political interests.

In addition, some of them have spent enormous energy in

supporting certain political figures. If this involvement in the head-to-head politics continues, it will leave them with less energy to think about the development of their pesantren in facing up to competitive education in an increasingly globalized world.

Interestingly enough, the above remarks by Basyuni recall the same concerns expressed a long time ago by a former religious affairs minister under Soeharto, Munawir Sjadzali.

Sjadzali, however, was more worried about the decline in the number of ulema, and their intellectual capacity in facing up to the modern world. Therefore, he encouraged the emergence of what he referred to as ulema plus.

At the practical level, he responded, up to 1988 at least, in two ways: his pilot project setting up five special Muslim high schools, or MAPK (*Madrasah Aliyah Program Khusus*), and his determined efforts to send young Muslim intellectuals to study abroad. The first project has been discontinued, while the second one continued until recently.

In Munawir's vision, ulema plus referred to those clerics who were prepared, or able, to shift from performing the traditional role of a cleric to performing that of a modern intellectual, or even to combine both roles.

By doing so, Munawir broadened the meaning of ulama to include those educated in religious tradition and who have also mastered modern knowledge and science. It was expected that this type of cleric would be better capable of addressing modern problems.

The recent satirical comments by leading Indonesian novelist Ahmad Tohari are also relevant in this regard. According to Tohari, the mass migration of clerics to the political arena is also the result of the lack of modern skills possessed by the graduates of Muslim religious schools. As a result, they are unable to compete in the "real" sectors, such as the economy or professions. Joining, or even establishing, political parties to be a quick fix for such people as they strive to improve their financial and economic positions.

When discussing the roles played by Muslim clerics, it is also worth remembering that the meaning of the word ulama in Arabic is not restricted to those who have mastered religious knowledge, but also the secular sciences and skills.

Thus, in so far as a person provides guidance and a valuable contribution to society, he can also be categorized as an ulema.

Unfortunately, it is rarely that we come across clerics with the intellectual capacity to be included in the ulama plus category.

As regards Basyuni's criticisms, it remains to be seen what he will do to address the problem, and reduce the involvement of clerics in head-to-head politics. Hopefully, steps will be taken by his ministry to prepare a phalanx of young, educated and dedicated ulemas.***

Can the Ulema Council respond to the real issues?

Bochum, February 28, 2010

In the last few weeks, the attention of Indonesians has been drawn to the development of law enforcement in the country.

They all wonder whether the recent turmoil will become a watershed in the history of law enforcement in the reform period, or whether all of these burning issues will turn to mere sour news.

In terms of the latter, the people could be fed up with the unending mess, which the media would easily forget.

On the other hand, rather than responding to the current debacle, the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council)) created controversy in its own world.

A Hollywood film, 2012, which features an imaginative doomsday, seems to bother this council.

The East Java MUI called on the *umma* (the Muslim community) not to watch this movie, which, according to their *fatwa* (edict), contradicts Islamic theology, according to which the knowledge of the doomsday belongs only to God.

Ulil Abshar Abdalla, an activist from JIL (Liberal Islamic Network) who plans to run for NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) chairman next year, argued the film had nothing to do with the prediction of

the end of the day (*kiamat*), but that it portrayed a catastrophe that could befall this world.

He believed the movie should be interpreted as a warning that our life on this earth is not always safe.

In the same tone, Ulil's colleague, Luthfi Syaukanie, also wondered why the MUI viewed the movie from a theological perspective.

In fact, looking at its recent track record, the MUI has often pronounced "unnecessary" edicts. Several ulemas in East Java declared Facebook as *haram*.

Why is driving a car not prohibited? You can hit people with a car - so can you rob a bank with a car!

Thus the MUI has overlooked the issues - corruption and law enforcement - that concern the Indonesian umma.

This contradicts the MUI's own vision and mission, which states the formation of the council was for the sake of the "nation and religion".

This nation is now faced with uncertain law enforcement and corruption.

The umma would have thanked the MUI if the council issued an edict that cursed corruption, which is part of thievery and robbery, whose prohibition can be found in many religious texts.

It would be great to hear the MUI's explanation for the practices of corruption in all levels of Indonesian bureaucracy.

However, the MUI's response to the true issues is usually late. This council finally denounced violence in the name of Islam, after all umma were disgusted by the atrocities committed by radicals.

The MUI in South Kalimantan, however, deserves credit for proposing to ban the noisy calls for prayers and excessive Koranic recitals by using loudspeakers for the sake of religious tolerance.

Indeed, the excessive loudspeakers have bothered non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The central and other provincial MUIs should follow this step if they are still committed to guarding this nation and umma.

Now is up to the MUI's board, whether they want to guard this nation or to live in their own world and pursue their own agenda. Corruption and law enforcement in Indonesian society are serious matters and need serious treatment and commitment.

The ulema council cannot pretend not to see this, instead of warning of the dangers of Hollywood movies or the use of the Facebook. Otherwise, the umma is mature enough, and do not need any guidance from the clumsy council, which does not stand on their side any longer.***

Repositioning MUI (the Indonesian Ulama Council)

Montreal, February 03, 2009

In the past few years, the authority of the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) in the eyes of Indonesian Muslims has been steadily tarnished by at least two causes: The outdated language used by the MUI in pronouncing edicts, and the apparently awkward position of the MUI in modern democratic Indonesian society.

Before dealing with these two causes, it is worth recalling here how the MUI took part in the New Order government's game.

During the New Order, the MUI served as a bridge in connecting the secular government and the Indonesian Muslim community (*ummah*). In this way, the MUI played a critical role as a translator of the government's intentions, by explaining certain secular agenda in plain religious terms to the people.

Thus the government's propaganda enjoyed at least two privileges: additional religious legitimacy from the MUI's religious authority, and the government's messages were easily understood by the ummah owing to the MUI's simple justifications.

Take the family planning program as an illustration. For the most modest Muslims who lived in many rural villages in Java, reducing the number of children in their families, as requested by the program, meant distrusting God's mighty ability to feed them

(*risqi*).

Furthermore, they held that the greater the number of children born into a family, the greater the blessings. A complicated demographic explanation would not have made sense to them. Instead, the government used the mouthpiece of the MUI.

In the early 1980s, the MUI endorsed the family planning program officially, by relating it to the long-term public benefit (*maslahah*).

In the 1990s, Ma'ruf Amin, still head of the MUI's edict commission, reinforced this old argument by saying that Islam "preferred" a strong generation rather than a large number of weak offspring.

In addition to that, it is no secret that the New Order government, to a certain extent, used the MUI as a means to tame certain "dissident" Muslim leaders who may have employed religious sentiment to agitate the people against the authoritarian regime.

This gambit bore fruit. The ulema, who joined the MUI, supported some "developmental" programs promoted by the government, e.g. Pancasila as the sole ideology of Indonesia. This story shows the MUI's romantic relationship with the New Order regime.

In this reform era, where Indonesian Muslims have increasing access to information and are ever more aware of democracy, the MUI has lost its role.

Yet the MUI still speak in the austere language of *halal* (allowed) and *haram* (prohibited), which is no longer sufficient to properly address the complex problems confronting Indonesian Muslims in the reformation era.

No wonder that some NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah leaders - Din Syamsuddin, Hasyim Muzadi, Masdar F. Mas'udi, and Abdurrachman Wahid - quashed the most recent edicts on smoking, yoga and vote abstention. Additionally, some tobacco farmers and traders fumed over the edict on smoking.

Once agan, how could the outdated halal and haram categories be employed to explain people's political manners and choices in the next general election, yoga for health or exercise, and the chemical content of tobacco?

In fact, in pronouncing the edict on the prohibition on vote abstention, the MUI took al-Mawardi's interpretation in his *al-Ahkam al-Sultania* (The Ordinances of Government) at face value. Can language from the 10th century address the political problems facing 21st century people?

The *ummah* are now discussing local autonomy, citizenship, the rule of law, an open market and other complicated issues, whereas the MUI are still measuring all of these with *halal* and *haram*. Yes, rabbit (edict 1983) and crab (edict 2002) are *halal*. Frog, however, is between *halal* and *haram* (edict 1984).

The MUI looks so clumsy in addressing the themes of interreligious marriage (edict 2005), attending Christmas (edict 1981), Shi'a Islam (edict 1984), pluralism, secularism and liberalism (edict 2005) and many other themes with the narrow halal and haram paradigm.

The position of the MUI in present-day democratic Indonesian society is awkward.

Secularization, which still often scares many Indonesians, including the MUI, is still the best solution for a relationship between state and religion. Religion is a private business, whereas the public realm must be ruled by secular law determined in accordance with people's current needs and demands. The MUI, as a religious authoritative institution, should keep out of public affairs.

On the other hand, the MUI's voice is muted in many real moral issues, such as rampant corruption in the bureaucracy.

Yet the MUI is planning to fight back against the finding that the process of marking *halal* and *haram* products involves bribery.

Now the elections issue has embroiled the MUI. Is anyone in the institution being lured to a certain political position after the election? Just guess!

It is advisable that the government repositions the MUI, which seems to work better under the umbrella of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, particularly under the research and development section.

In this way, the MUI may gain access to current research and new trends of "Islamic" thoughts which may at least enrich the language of its edicts.***

The lost role of 'Pak Haji'

Yogyakarta, Nopember 26, 2010

Indonesia is welcoming the pilgrims from the Islamic holiest land — Hijaz. After throwing pebbles at the pillars in Mina (*jumrah*), they performed the farewell circumambulation of the Kabah (*tawaf wada*). At home family and friends will address those who completed the ritual with new titles — *Pak* Haji and *Bu* Hajah (Mr. and Mrs. Haj).

To visit the Kabah in Mecca and the mosque of the Prophet in Medina, many Indonesians sacrificed their most precious belongings, such as land, animals, gold, cars and savings.

They sold their assets in order to collect about US$3,500 to apply for the trip with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Those who want to enjoy more luxurious facilities in a package called "haji-plus" must pay approximately double the ordinary price.

Haj is the most expensive ritual in Islam. It involves financial, managerial, physical and psychological issues.

However, a question can now be raised about what kind of role *Pak* Haji and *Bu* Hajah can play in our modern Indonesian society. It remains unclear whether the title still implies positive social and religious status. Beyond economic factors, particularly as a lucrative state business which enormously benefits those who are involved in its management, how the haj contributes to social and

religious dimensions in society cries out for explanation.

Historians and scholars, such as Martin van Bruinessen, M. C. Ricklef, and Moeslim Abdurrahman, wrote that in Indonesia haj was a unique Islamic ritual with a vital social dimension. "In the colonial period, the haj indeed had a tremendous social impact upon Indonesian society."

In the old days, those who went to the holy land did not merely perform haj. They also sought greater knowledge about Islam by studying Arabic, reading books and learning other cultures. Returning from Hijaz, *Pak* Hajis would share what they learned in the holy land. In the colonial period, the haj indeed had a tremendous social impact upon Indonesian society. The route connecting the archipelago and Middle Eastern countries also indicated the way in which the ties between the two regions — in terms of information, culture and religion — was built and developed. Magazines and journals were transported via travelers, a number of whom were pilgrims. Knowledge was transferred orally. Goods were exchanged.

Scholars and traders traveled back and forth between the two territories. Ideas traveled from one place to another. It comes as no surprise that the awareness of nationalism on "the land below the wind," as M. Laffan noted, somehow had an affinity with the way in which this nation was connected to the Middle Eastern region. In this vein, the story of nationalism in the country, which can be interpreted as the awareness of Indonesia's own identity upon which the spirit of the struggle against the Dutch colonial regime was based, can be linked to religion, namely Islam.

Thus, Indonesian nationalism did not come entirely from Western language dictionaries. However, the common sense of brotherhood among Muslims in many regions also fueled this sentiment, particularly in facing "the common enemy" of colonial rulers.

In this regard, Islam as a global religion and phenomenon can be felt.

To return to the main issue, what is obvious is that it is diffi cult to discover the social and political role of the current haj as seen in the old days.

In fact, the haj is performed effectively and efficiently as

modern technology and management play a role. This, however, decreases the social and political dimension. True, modern pilgrims traveling by plane are not as exhausted as pilgrims in the old days, who had no choice but to take ships. However, the modern pilgrims has much less time to study Arabic, learn other cultures and add more knowledge than the ancient pilgrims did.

Now, Indonesian pilgrims always flock together from departure until their arrival back home. They stay in hotels, camps and perform all rituals together.

What Mr. and Mrs. Haji will tell us about the holy land is the story of their encounters with their own neighbors and old friends. It is like a reunion in the foreign country. Like other normal tourists visiting new places, the pilgrims will describe how impressive their trip was.***

Welcoming Ramadan: The audacity of sanity

Heidelberg, September 04, 2008

During the weeks before Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month, we received good news and bad news. That Mahfud MD, the new head of the Constitutional Court, slammed sharia bylaws in less than 24 hours after being sworn in is good news. That a Muslim mob has driven Christians to leave their campus is bad news.

Many members of the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) went to the streets again to demand both their leader's release from police custody and the banning of Ahmadiyah, horrifying news. Minister of Religious Affairs Maftuh Basyuni guaranteed the government will not issue any Presidential regulation to outlaw Ahmadiyah, which is a relief.

In addition, the FPI has already unleashed an assault against a certain kiosk they suspect of selling alcohol. Give me a break. I don't want to hear any more awful news.

The old Javanese saying, *sing waras ngalah* (The sane should recoil), is no longer relevant for the above-mentioned news. On the contrary, those still in control who are exercising full wisdom and reason should fight back.

The silent majority, who disagree with any form of violence

and intolerance, should raise their voices to counterbalance those who do not believe in the use of human reason. Now that Mahfud MD has shown his courage, others should be inspired by it.

Once again, we should show our willingness to stand behind Mahfud.

It is not true that sharia-inspired bylaws, already adopted by some 480 regencies, will strengthen the Muslim community in Indonesia. That's the argument radicals have tried to sell us.

What is correct is that these sharia ordinances will -- and in many instances have already -- become a hurdle for Indonesian Muslims to overcome. These bylaws only put forth a limited version of sharia dictated by the local governments, who have based their initiatives neither on the advice of competent Muslim scholars nor on the reading of the rich body of literature on the subject.

Instead, a significant number of sharia bylaws are products of copy-paste. Verse by verse and word by word, certain regions have taken regulations from other regions. Pathetic as it may sound, those local governments are defining what sharia means for their fellow local Muslims. Take a wild guess whether those local governments have taken the local needs and demands into consideration or not.

True, the annulment of sharia bylaws will help Indonesian Muslims rediscover their own identity. They do not require literal and immature versions of sharia to help them behave as better Muslims. Nor do they need local governments to guide and spy on them as they carry out their religious duties.

What Indonesian Muslims need is to be proud to be Indonesians, whose cultures, traditions, and wisdom are distinct from other Muslims in the world. In fact, each Muslim culture in the world offers its own way to contribute to humanity.

It is false that annulling immature sharia interpretations encoded in many local ordinances will threaten Indonesian Muslims. Annulling them will instead undermine those who exploit Muslim sentiment for political and other purposes.

As for the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia, its long tradition has so far hatched many progressive ideas in the course of the history of Indonesian Muslims. It is worth recalling that Mukti Ali, a minister under Soeharto, may be one of the most important

fathers of religious dialogue in Indonesia.

Mukti Ali coined the phrase "agreement in disagreement" in calling for maintaining harmonious relations among many religious communities. In interpreting Islamic inheritance law, Munawir Sjadzali, another New Order minister, also boldly proposed men and women should inherit equal shares.

The torch of progressive tradition in that ministry passed to Tarmizi Tahir whose enthusiasm for sending Indonesian students abroad to broaden the perspective of Islamic studies in Indonesia was apparent.

This open-mindedness should not be extinguished. The torch now rests in Maftuh Basyuni's hands, and his duty is to keep it ablaze. His statement negating any ban against Ahmadiyah should be interpreted as his initial step in restoring the tradition of that ministry under his administration.

It is time for both NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah to lend support to Mahfud. Let the past frictions between NU and Muhammadiyah become history so they can stand shoulder to shoulder to fight against radicalism.

A new kind of *santri*, or observant Muslim, has emerged in the aftermath of reformation and challenged the older type of *santri*. These new *santri* have gone astray, betraying the old tradition, which is deeply rooted in NU and Muhammadiyah. Thus, only these two organizations can guide their *ummah* (community of Muslims) to rediscover truly Indonesian Islam.***

Capitalism during Ramadan

Yogyakarta, August 08, 2010

Islam, like Buddhism, teaches us to endure suffering, through which we can learn some lessons including in patience, disquietude and self-control.

From dawn to dusk, during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are commanded to fast. Ideally, Ramadan is a month in which modesty, moderation, calmness and self-restraint are maintained.

However, André Möller, a Swedish anthropologist who conducted field research and observation in Yogyakarta and Blora, Central Java, noted that not only do Indonesian Muslims perform Ramadan rites (fasting, praying and reciting the Koran), but also perform cultural activities creatively, so much so that they have created a unique tradition, distinguished from Islamic traditions found in other countries.

Indeed, for contemporary Muslims, Ramadan is not merely a religious obligation, with the promise of reward in the hereafter. Ramadan has to do with worldly matters.

In fact, during the fasting month, the economic situation in the market dominates the news. Inflation soars, as prices of basic needs — rice, vegetables, egg, meat, cooking oil and flour — rocket.

As a rule, when demands mount in the market, so do prices.

The fasting month, which ideally teaches us to experience hunger and thirst, blesses those who own capital.

In the same breath, the average people shoulder more burden, as the basic needs are more unaffordable to them.

Capitalism fills the air of Ramadan. There are more temptations for consumers to spend their money on fashion, transportation and food. Profits flow into the hands of those who own capital.

Business during Ramadan is of great benefit to the electronic media. TV stations launch special Ramadan programs, ranging from religious preaching to movies and comedy. Given this, during the breakfast before dawn, people enjoy their meals with TVs in front of them always on. During supper after sunset TVs also accompany meals.

TV programs have a good chance to hit the box office. It is no wonder that the religious romance *Ketika cinta bertasbih* (When love is glorified) became a TV series. As millions of people who had already watched the movie version on the big screen, and were already familiar with the plot and its characters, the new TV version with the same actresses has attracted a considerable number of viewers.

Additionally, in Ramadan, TV stars adopt a more Islamic fashion look, with women wearing the *jilbab* (veil) and men wearing the *baju koko* (traditional shirt without collar) and Muslim cap.

Such clothing items are also promoted in the market throughout Ramadan.

Those who own capital have a golden opportunity to multiply this money during Ramadan. The month blesses "those who have" with a bountiful harvest, whereas "those who have not" still struggle hard to fulfill their basic needs.

Reality, indeed, often contradicts ideality. What should be is not always congruent with what really happens.

The fasting rite should provide moral lessons, particularly with regard to the values of moderation, modesty and self-restraint. In reality, consumerism rules the atmosphere of Ramadan. The lust prevails over self-control.

To recall old wisdoms, Indonesian leaders and intellectuals in the early 20th century often criticized capitalism, which was

considered to have served as a foundation for colonialism.

It is not surprising that in the writings penned by HOS Tjokroaminoto, Tan Malaka, Sutan Sjahrir and Mohammad Hatta, the seeds of Marxism and socialism can be found.

Tjokroaminoto particularly believed that Islam came to this world to reveal messages of social justice, equity and fairness. Islam aims to elevate the lower class of society.

In the works of later Indonesian Muslim intellectuals — for example Moeslim Abdurrahman, Abdul Munir Mulkhan, Mansur Faqih and Kuntowidjoyo — the spirit of socialism can still be felt.

These intellectuals propose that Islamic theology should be formulated in a way that marginal groups and poor people are empowered to obtain equal rights in the economy, education and public service.

However, the recent religious leaders rarely voice the above spirit. Rather, most public preachers and politicians, in the name of Islam, enjoy and support the trend in the market, which is more beneficial for them.

Religion, and spiritualism, go hand in hand with the guts of capitalism. During the month of Ramadan, this can be felt.

This does not suggest that the market is evil. However, to leave those who are weak and crushed by the market unprotected, particularly when religion does not side with them any longer, is wrong.

The message of fasting is clear; that is to feel thirst and hunger, not to shop for more luxurious items and consume huge amounts of food at night.***

Victorious Idul Fitri and prevailing democracy

Sydney, July 26, 2014

Muslims in Indonesia and beyond will celebrate the happy day of Idul Fitri after a month of fasting during Ramadhan.

According to Islamic theology and belief, Idul Fitri is a victorious day, after restraining from food and drink during the day and praying to God at night.

In order to control both desire and appetite, the Almighty commands Muslims to feel the suffering of hunger and thirst.

This year's Idul Fitri is special for Indonesians, who are now still in celebratory mood after the "fiesta of democracy", in which their voices were heard and counted to determine the future of the nation. What makes this year's election so special is the fact that president-elect Joko Widodo (Jokowi), the former mayor of Surakarta, Central Java, and current governor of Jakarta, symbolizes the true spirit of reform.

While previous presidents after Soeharto's fall were closely tied in one way or another to the New Order's social and political elite, Jokowi is a completely new and fresh proposition.

Jokowi won public sympathy and support in the election

because he had neither served in the New Order regime nor opposed it. His political career and popularity in Indonesians' eyes have been built through local leadership in both Surakarta and Jakarta during the reform era.

Jokowi, unlike his election rival Prabowo Subianto, did not serve under Soeharto, nor was he — unlike BJ Habibie and current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono — raised under Soeharto's political mentorship.

And unlike Amien Rais and former president Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Jokowi never directly confronted Soeharto.

The Indonesian people's choice of Jokowi truly marks a dividing line between the New Order era and the reform era.

During this year's victorious Idul Fitri, Indonesians can celebrate the real separation of the reform era's political leadership from the New Order.

As hard as the month's fasting has been, during the tumultuous electoral campaign, Indonesians were confronted with so many temptations such as smear campaigns, public lies, the spread of hatred, political manipulation, fake polling and surveys, and vote-buying and vote-rigging, all of which were at the expense of social cohesion and could have cost the nation its unity.

However, Indonesia has passed the test. Democracy is hard and expensive but we are making it. Indonesia can now pride itself on being the most democratic country in the Muslim world.

Unlike Middle Eastern countries, which are either ruled by authoritarian kings or divided by civil wars, Indonesia can tolerate the differences among political choices — the essence of democracy.

To illustrate this point, in order to prevent Islamism from controlling politics, Egypt removed Mohamed Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood government through people power and military force.

Libya has a long way to go following Moammar Qaddafi's tragic end. Syria is still in a civil war. Tunisia has plenty of tough work ahead. Turkey, the only Muslim country comparable to Indonesia in terms of its "secularization", is increasingly in the grip of the conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party), whereas the secular camp is fighting back.

Malaysia, on the other hand, differs from Indonesia at two respects, namely in terms of its relative lack of population heterogeneity and its different democratic path.

Indonesia has demonstrated that the freedom following the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime can guarantee fair local and national elections.

During the campaign season that precedes elections, people actively and openly share their political opinions without fear of intimidation.

However, the Idul Fitri euphoria in the aftermath of the presidential election should not drown us. As Jokowi said: "Farmers should return to the paddy fields, fishermen to the sea and others to their offices." Neither Idul Fitri nor the election victory is the final goal.

The political promises must be fulfilled under the watchful eye of the voters.

Those who voted, whether for or against Jokowi and his running mate Jusuf Kalla, will be watching — along with the whole world — for the delivery of the new government's programs.***

Idul Fitri and Christmas have similar substances

Heidelberg, Montreal, September 30, 2008

Idul Fitri and Christmas bear a substantial similarity to each other: their human side. It is true -- from a theological perspective -- that both celebrations have to do with a man's business with his God. Yet, in real life, the two involve more a man's business with other men than man's business with his God.

During the days prior to Idul Fitri, Indonesian Muslims are always eager to go back to their home towns (*mudik*) to spend their holidays with their relatives and close friends. Unfortunately, competition is stiff for the already incredibly steeply priced bus, train, airplane, and boat tickets.

Many, alternatively, decide to *mudik* with their motorcycles, riding from one end of the long island of Java to the other, or points in between. The same pattern occurs during the Christmas holidays in both Germany and Canada, as reflected in the soaring price of airplane tickets. Christmas is a human holiday. So is Idul Fitri.

Sadly, the price of every basic commodity in Indonesia -- from chili peppers to flour -- in the days leading up to Idul Fitri has soared unbelievably. In Canada and Germany, however, prices for

such staples remain steady in the weeks before Christmas. While every Idul Fitri numerous car accidents along Java's northern coastal route embellish our newspaper pages, no comparable tragic stories come out of Germany and Canada during Christmas.

Last Christmas, I went to Luxembourg by train with some friends. I still remember a newspaper article I read during the trip which laid out the history of how Dec. 25 was chosen as the day to commemorate Christ's birth. The early Church converted the winter festival of pagan Romans -- celebrated on Dec. 25 just after the winter solstice -- into the Christmas celebration.

Many scholars tell us the exact date of Jesus' birth remains puzzling. Most ordinary modern people, nonetheless, accept the holiday without bothering to question it.

The Idul Fitri celebration is a much later human invention and a good one.

In most Middle Eastern Muslim countries, Idul Adha, or the day of sacrifice, is given more importance than Idul Fitri, primarily because Idul Adha occurs during the haj season, when millions of Muslims from all over the world go on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. On that day they sacrifice animals in the holy land.

Indonesian Muslims, however, celebrate Idul Fitri more keenly than Idul Adha. *Halal bihalal* -- a feast with colorful yummy Indonesian foods during which younger people confess their sins to older ones (*sungkeman*) -- is a truly Indonesian Islamic innovation (*bid'ah*). No Koran verse nor prophetic tradition commands Muslims to hold these events.

Last Easter, I attended a ceremony in a church behind Heidelberg University's philosophy faculty. I listened carefully as a priest read the story of the suffering, crucified Jesus, which touched me greatly. I imagined the same happened in the *sirah* writings which recount the life of the Prophet Muhammad during the Meccan period during which his Quraishite fellows vehemently opposed his prophetic mission. An Easter choir at the church glorified God. Likewise, the night before Idul Fitri Muslims chant, also proclaiming, "God is great."

However, in Indonesia of late, this formula has been oft recited in the wrong place and wrong time for the wrong purpose. The mantra has been abused to scare other people. During the

trial of their leader, Habib Rizieq, some FPI (Islam Defenders Front) members flooded the courtroom and disrupted it with their annoying chants.

Musdah Mulia, a prominent Indonesian Muslim feminist, attested to this. Additionally, Muhammad Guntur Romli, a witness and one of the seventy injured during the Monas fracas -- the back story for the courtroom dramatics -- was terrorized with their misbehavior. And the story is not over yet. Nong Darul Mahmada, another victim, was also threatened and sexually abused by these members. Not only did these acts go against court ethics, they also insulted a sacred creed.

You can bet we will soon see some people roaring “God is great” on the streets again to support the proposed anti-pornography bill. If they do, it is because they intend to deter critics of that bigoted bill, which, of course, hardly appreciates human freedom and choice in a democratic country.

Indeed, this formula of “God is great” is neutral. It can be used for either virtuous or nasty purposes. One can intone it to remind us of the greatness of God for freeing many prophets and heroes from difficulties -- ranging from Abraham to Abraham Lincoln, from Jesus to Malcolm X, from Muhammad to Sukarno, and from Siddhartha Gautama to M. Hatta. The FPI’s use of the phrase, on the other hand, offers nasty examples.

The increased use of sacred symbols hand in hand with dreadful deeds is no longer an unexpected juxtaposition. The growing number of mosques, as Mustafa Bisri once satirized, is accompanied by a parallel growth in corruption cases.

“God is great”, however, should be invoked when you are oppressed, not when you are torturing others. You should praise God’s glory when trying to relieve others’ burdens, not when threatening them.

The time for reciting “God is great” during Idul Fitri celebrations is appropriate, due to its human side. The greatness of God is accompanied by hugs, smiles, hand-shaking, confession, forgiving others, and eating traditional Indonesian foods -- from *ketupat*, boiled rice cake wrapped in woven coconut leaf packets, to *onde-onde*, sticky rice balls covered with sesame seeds.***

Idul Adha sacrifice: Slaughtering democracy in Indonesia

Sydney, October 4, 2014

According to both Christian and Islamic religious traditions and theologies, the important ancient figure Abraham (to whom all Semitic roots are traced), on the basis of God's command, was going to sacrifice his son.

However, God sent an angel to replace this human being with a goat. Abraham then slaughtered the goat, not his beloved son.

We can learn a lesson from this old Mesopotamian mythical tale, which is still revived in both modern Christian and Islamic faiths.

God commanded us to sacrifice what we deem the most valuable to ourselves for the sake of humanity overall and for our own society on a smaller scale.

On every Idul Adha, the second greatest Islamic religious celebration in Indonesia after Idul Fitri, preachers standing in pulpits always reenact this old story before their audience.

Preachers present various meanings with new contexts. The greatest lesson of sacrifice of the most valuable of our belongings is

always repeated.

However, what we are learning in the current development of democracy, in the aftermath of the presidential election, is the egoistic, arrogant and selfish attitude displayed by the honorable members of the Indonesian House of Representatives just before they finished their term.

They had no intention other than evil deeds for the sake of their political interests. They wanted to take revenge because their presidential candidate was defeated in the ballots.

They have done what the common people would never have imagined, they were ready to take all risks to gain power and control over Indonesian politics.

Yes, they just slaughtered our democracy because they could not control its spirit in the people.

Unlike Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice his beloved son, whose birth he and his wife had expected for a long time, the members of the House just sacrificed society's spirit of participation in the direct election of their local leaders.

These politicians know exactly that the people understand their bad behavior and sinful deeds: corruption, bribery, dishonesty, collusion and vote buying.

They realize that to bribe hundreds of members of the local legislative councils is much cheaper than to hold political campaigns, which need a lot of energy, passion, strategy and money.

The politicians had no intention other than to kill democracy in the early stage of its growth, regardless of the fact that it has been nurtured by the people's control, media and intellectuals. They want to silence democracy stakeholders altogether.

The consequence of the passage of the New Order-styled bill on the election of local leaders through regional legislative councils is that there will be no more local leaders close enough to listen to the people's hearts.

The politicians seemed to realize that they could not directly compete against Joko "Jokowi" Widodo (the president-elect who is climbing the political ladder by serving the people), Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) (the current deputy governor of Jakarta who just boldly quit the Gerindra Party), Tri Rismaharini (the current Surabaya mayor who is making the city nicer and tidier), Ridwan

Kamil (the popular mayor of Bandung), and others.

Yes, far from sacrificing their valuable energy, passion, time and money for the sake of democracy, our House politicians would rather kill democracy itself, just because their presidential candidate lost the election.

Tempo magazine reported that following their success in passing the regional election bill, they would likely revive the New Order tyrant oligarchy.

They want to simplify the presidential election and hold it in their hands and to limit the game only to the Senayan circle, so that they can play it like in the old days.

Yes, they did give the presidential helm to Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid and took it away from Megawati Soekarnoputri in 1999. When Gus Dur no longer followed their will, they seized it back and handed it to Megawati in 2001.

Only a few of the Senayan elite completely controlled this game, whereas the people, who they considered too young and immature, could only watch their actions through TVs and newspapers.

We now can guess easily the true intention and agenda of the honorable people’s representatives: They want to pave the way for the Red-and-White Coalition bigwigs to win their bid for presidency without the people’s votes.

They know that Indonesians will not vote for them.

This Idul Adha, we should remind the politicians, particularly the newly installed lawmakers, to return the people’s political rights and stop sacrificing democracy for their short-term interests.***

Idul Adha: Personal piety instead of the common good

Jakarta, December 06, 2008

Idul Adha, like Ramadan and Idul Fitri, is welcomed by Indonesian Muslims every year with various slogans written on boards and posters. Many of these posters are hung along Jakarta's streets, summoning the Muslims to perform Idul Adha's main rite: Animal sacrifice.

In Ciputat, for example, a picture of an old woman on a big board on Ir. Juanda street says: "*Terima Kasih Ita*/Thank you brother/sister" (for your sacrificed animals). Therefore, in this season, selling goats and cows for that purpose is big business. Just look at many of Depok's corners, an area of Jakarta, where the smell of goat and cow urine is as painful as that of the black heavy smoke spewing out of old public buses. As soon as Idul Adha is over, the lucrative business will fade away.

Yes, we Indonesians like to show our private piety in public, and this tendency can be seen on these ads during Islamic holidays. Certain politicians, in this regard, also seem to enjoy this opportunity, and use it to promote their own image that they accord with the Indonesian standard of personal piety.

Promoting your own personal piety in this manner is so

beneficial, cheap, easy and immeasurable -- as nobody can prove or disprove it. Additionally, showing piety seems to have become part of our politeness, showing ourselves to be irreligious or atheistic, on the other hand, seems to go against public morality -- if not a form of committing suicide.

In Depok, some old ads, perhaps remaining from Ramadan, can still be found, calling for Muslims to recite more Koranic verses, to read *basmallah* (reading-initiation by mentioning God) before doing all activities and to use the right hand -- instead of the left -- in every supposed virtuous deed. Interestingly, a few of these ads include pictures of Depok's mayor -- one has him smiling and surrounded by people wearing *songkok* -- an Indonesian hat which usually symbolizes piety -- and women wearing scarves *(jilbab)*.

In view of this, most of Indonesia's Muslims still emphasize that individual piety is to be shown in public. This, however, offers a paradox -- if not an absurdity -- with regard to the real life. Just go to Depok. You don't have to be a civil engineer or an urban planner to feel the poor quality of Depok's roads and streets. Most of them are becoming bumpier and more and more holes are filling with muddy water. Riding in a car is like dancing, because of the instability of our body. Enjoy it.

Why do these ads not talk about those damaged public facilities -- but instead call on Depok's citizens to read more Scripture, to recite magic formulas and to spread prejudice against left-handed people? In view of this, I'm afraid that these posters are hung there to cover reality with fake piety. The citizens are urged to turn their attention from bumpy roads to personal piety. Reality is unpleasant, just escape from it. These ads seem to covey that message.

Yes, in Depok there is a mosque with a golden dome, which has recently attracted more pilgrims from outside of Jakarta. One then may wonder how these people feel when they visit that luxurious mosque while traveling on such streets and roads? Don't they see the many paradoxes? The mosque is indeed sumptuous, whereas the streets and roads leading to that mosque are far below standard.

Not only the Idul Adha ads hanging on the roadsides but also our day to day lives have gone against the true spirit of Idul Adha. Just recall the story of Abraham which is preserved in both

the Bible and the Koran. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his own beloved son -- be he Ishmael or Isaac -- to teach us the meaning of "sacrifice". That is, we should sacrifice our most beloved possessions -- including our individual interests -- for the sake of a greater and wider interest, such as those of the public.

Here is another paradox. Just observe the streets in Depok. Many of the newest models of cars from various brands -- which are personal belongings -- pass by us every day on these damaged roads -- which are public facilities. You see, some of us show their personal belongings on the damaged public facilities. Note as well that these kinds of roads are surrounded by an increasing number of deluxe personal houses and magnificent malls.

Once again, most of the Idul Adha ads hanging on the roadsides, unfortunately, promote individual piety with the nuance of individual interest and gain. Many still hold, as most of our preachers keep telling us, that if you sacrifice an animal, you will receive a reward as big as that animal -- a gain-and-lose proposition.

Many even still believe that in the world to come you are going to ride your sacrificed animal as a vehicle on the way to paradise. Just imagine that on that road to paradise there will be so many goats, cows and camels serving as vehicles. Be careful and obey the traffic lights, don't get trapped in traffic jams. By the way, are the roads there bumpy, too?

What most of us, particularly our politicians, are doing and promoting does not fulfill what we need. We do need more individuals to sacrifice their interests for the sake of the public, just like Abraham who was ready to sacrifice his own beloved son. But most of us seem to have sacrificed public interest and enjoy our personal luxuries. No wonder corruption keeps our country famous. ***

Status quo in Muhammadiyah

Yogyakarta, July 13, 2010

There is no doubt that Muhammadiyah, as a social religious organization like NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), has played a significant role in building the nation's character. Muhammadiyah's contribution in education and public service has been written with a golden pen in the pages of Indonesian history.

However, after the reformasi period — in which political parties have taken a greater role in the national leadership — mass social organizations, such as Muhammadiyah and NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), have had to reorient their visions and missions.

Unlike in the New Order period, in which the military dominated national leadership and the birth of leaders from civil society were hampered, the reform period welcomed civil leaders to appear in the stage. Against this backdrop, Muhammadiyah has to reconsider its position in the national arena — whether the organization should play a role similar to that of political parties or recommit to education and public service by, consequently, distancing itself from short-term political maneuvers.

However, from the organization's recent national congress held in Yogyakarta the aforementioned mission seems unclear.

The top tier of Muhammadiyah remains in the hands of Din Syamsuddin, a former Golkar activist who has never managed to completely cut ties with politics. Perhaps, due to his pragmatic political consideration, Syamsuddin's position in the eyes of the public is often ambiguous, if not confusing.

For instance, in a move likely to detract votes from the PAN (National Mandate Party), established by former Muhammadiyah chairman and the head of parliament respectively Amien Rais, Syamsuddin lent weight to the birth of the PMB (Nation's Sun Party), which failed to reach the threshold at the last general election. And in an apparent attempt to widen his audience among various Muslim groups, Syamsuddin attended and spoke at the "caliphate conference" held by the hardline HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia).

Lately, Syamsuddin has delivered statements on Muhammadiyah's position vis-à-vis the administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Literally, the content of the message seems trivial. However, the implication of the statement seems to suggest that the government should take Muhammadiyah into account in the government's political decisions, which would effectively place the organization in the position of a political party.

It is true that Muhammadiyah has given birth to the motor of reforms, Amien Rais. In this way, this religious organization played a role which political parties during the New Order Golkar, the PPP (United Development Party), and PDI failed to take. The three political parties did not initiate reforms, far less recommend that Soeharto, who ruled the country for more than three decades, step down. It was social leaders outside politics such as Amien Rais, Abdurrachman Wahid (Gus Dur), Nurcholish Madjid, Gunawan Muhammad, Sri Bintang Pamungkas, Emha Ainun Nadjib, and many other intellectuals who led Indonesia to reform.

However, after reformasi was carried out, daily political agenda was rightfully returned to political parties, whose performance unfortunately is still disappointing.

Social religious organizations, such as NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah, should return to "barracks" to guide the Islamic community with the spirit that Ahmad Dahlan

(Muhammadiyah) and Hasyim Asy'ari (NU) projected.

The two leaders, together with their colleagues, founded the two organizations without hoping for immediate political reward or positions from the Dutch colonial government.

For the sake of religiosity and the betterment of the fate of the country's Muslims, the two organizations were established and later infused with politics.

Now, with Din Syamsuddin at the helm, many wonder whether political pragmatism will prevail in Muhammadiyah in the next term. If so, the status quo will win. Serious change in the direction of the organization is hard to expect.

Muslims, on the other hand, are hoping the presence of religious leaders with sincerity and vision, who forget short-term political gains. Otherwise, the community would fall prey of radical ideologies, which have never based their dogma on the Indonesian way of life. Ironically, radical ideologies have slowly but surely penetrated into the body of Muhammadiyah. Some with radical ideologies have room to broadcast their ideas in the organization. They often attacked their fellows in the organization with the brand of being "too liberal". Radicals have also taken over certain mosques, leaving some Muhammadiyah activists to keep complaining.

Muhammadiyah has enough capital with intellectuals, facilities and other resources. Muhammadiyah, together with NU, can fight back. Forgetting rivalries which often marred the old days, the two should share the fight against the new common enemy, radicalism.

Muhammadiyah together with other organizations of same and different faiths should always stay in the front row to continue the task of protecting this nation's diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities.

Din Syamsuddin, who wore a complete traditional Javanese suit and hat during the opening ceremony at the Mandala Krida Stadium in Yogyakarta, reminded us that Muhammadiyah is the sun which enlightens the earth. He should be reminded that in this galaxy there are millions stars, including the suns, which exist side by side in harmony. Any crash or collision would mean the end of the world as we know it.***

What can Sharia banking offer?

Montreal, March 10, 2009

A slump in global markets around the world has led political leaders everywhere to tap creative and innovative ideas. In the past few months, the word “bailout”, adopted as a financial policy in both developed and developing countries, has appeared repeatedly in newspaper headlines.

Muslim leaders, who attended the fifth WIEF (World Islamic Economic Forum) in Jakarta recently, have sought to unearth wisdom from Islamic traditions, that is, the Islamic financial system of Sharia banking, which is gaining increasing popularity in Indonesia.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono stated, “Islamic banking should take a front seat because it has not been affected by the crisis.” Likewise, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, pinpointed the “unbridled greed” in the current conventional financial system which has caused this global economic crisis, saying the “Islamic financial system” could be a solution.

In view of the heterogeneous modern world, such an effort is not entirely new. The current modern world constitutes various

elements of Chinese, Indian, Roman, Greece, Arabic, Malay and many more traditions. No one can claim theirs a dominant tradition; nor can one ignore certain elements of another's.

Thus, the Islamic-Arabic tradition has made its own contribution to modern culture and science. The origin of many vital scientific terms can be traced to Arabic roots, such as algebra (al-jabar), alchemy (al-kimya), baccalaureate (bi haqq al-riwayah), and many others. People prefer to use Arabic to Roman numerals.

In addition, the words orangutan, amok, and mango derive from Malay's lexicon. Paper was first made in China. Famous cheeses are products of Italy and French. The forefathers of modern philosophy were Greek. Japanese and European cars are competitive in the global market. My laptop was made in Malaysia, whereas my blue jeans are an original product from Tanah Abang, a traditional market in Jakarta.

As long as the intention of the enterprise is not merely apologetic, i.e., to merely justify one's own faith and belief, it should be interpreted as a positive contribution. The Islamic financial system, Sharia banking, should be open to all users regardless of their faith, gender, ethnicity and nationality. In the future, if the Sharia banking system survives, it should not become the property of Muslim communities exclusively. Other communities should be welcome to open such a bank, which may benefit them, and they should not be prevented modifying it, if necessary.

However, this is still wishful thinking, for there is no guarantee yet of the durability of this "unripe" system. The Sharia system is still in the making. Given the many schools of Islamic law (note that most Indonesian Sunnis acknowledge four main schools, Malikite, Hanbalite, Shafi'ite, and Hanafite), the system has to decide which opinions are to be used.

Looking at history, religions and religious sentiment have played a critical role in advancing human innovation, from education, to medicine, to music. Take the YMCA (The Young Men's Christian Association) founded in London in 1844, as an example. The original purpose of this evangelical organization was to promote the Christian faith and practices.

But now, the worldwide services of this organization are open to all members, regardless of their faith and ethnicity. Here in

Montreal, my daughter attended the YMCA's swimming class and many other activities.

In Indonesia, the openness of religious organizations and charity foundations is nothing new. The Muhammadiyah, Catholic and Protestant communities have founded a number of universities and hospitals, whose services have broadened from religious purposes to public interest.

The Indonesian Muslim community has a longstanding tradition of charity, such as almsgiving (*zakat*), endowment (*waqf*), and voluntary alms (*sadaqah*), whose cultivation still requires better management. As the country with the largest Muslim population in world, we have only two reputable organizations, Bazis the Institution for Zakat Management, since 1989, and Ru mah Zakat, the House of Zakat, since 1998, which have received alms from donators and distributed them to the needy. Their activities, however, remain limited in scope to religious activities. The House of Zakat has granted a number of scholarships to students from elementary to senior high schools.

However, compared to the YMCA, which has evolved and matured, these two zakat organizations still have a long way to go.

In this country anything labelled "Islamic", from novels, movies, clothes, lifestyles, politics, to banking systems can gain popularity effortlessly. Indonesia is a big market. On the other hand, leaders of the country should not merely sell ideas with "Islamic" accessories; they should also show the true substance of ideas to the public.

With regard to the Muslim leaders' good intentions of offering a solution to the world recession, it is indeed a good signal. At least it turns the Muslim world's attention from politics, which merely sharply contrasts their world view with that of the West, to the economy.***

CHAPTER THREE
CONSERVATISM AND RADICALISM

Indonesian Muslims should stay on alert

Heidelberg, January 26, 2007

Recent praise from charismatic Egyptian Muslim figure Yusuf Qardawi during his visit to Indonesia is reason enough to make us proud. The celebrated scholar is quite optimistic that the democracy in place in the country can set other Muslim countries a good example. This also proves that Islam does not contradict the values of democracy.

Qardawi is not alone in commenting on the unique nature and the tolerant culture of Indonesian Muslims. Modern Pakistani Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman, a professor from Chicago University and McGill Canada University, has long shared this optimism. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who died just last year, was also of this opinion, saying Islam in Indonesia was marked with tolerance, harmony and even eclecticism. Another modern scholar like Bassam Tibi of Gottingen University in Germany, also hails Indonesia's characteristic tolerant culture. However, observing the recent developments involving Indonesian Muslims in politics, Qardawi's praise should not be taken for granted. Instead, it should be considered an alert, especially since Islamic radicalism is currently at a high, at least as far as the media

coverage is concerned.

There are several reasons why Indonesian Muslims should not be complacent. The most salient feature is the process of narrowing the interpretation of sharia. The term, which is generally accepted as meaning ethics or Muslim piety, has been recently hijacked by many local politicians. They have gone so far as to formalize sharia into a blatantly political tool. This rigid interpretation of sharia can be seen in the 23 regional ordinances recently passed by local authorities. How come the rich tradition of sharia as it is written in many works of literature is now understood as political regulations that restrict the role of women and enforce the wearing of the jilbab or veil. Indonesian Muslim scholars should remind the politicians that fiqh, or the guidelines for daily Islamic ritual, is only a small branch of sharia. It is imperative that communication is built between politicians and scholars, who were likely absent in the drafting process of the regulations.

The formalization of sharia will encourage the use of religion in the 2009 general election. Some political parties will compete with each other to offer more sharia-based regulations to voters, claiming to be more Islamic than the others. Indeed, the use of religion as political bargaining chip is cheaper and easier than formulating sophisticated ideas on how to fight poverty, corruption and injustice.

One of Indonesia's great Muslim thinkers, the late Nurcholish Madjid, coined a popular expression against the politicization of Islam: "Islam yes, Islamic party no!" Unfortunately, his moral lessons are now falling on deaf ears. Several politicians and ideologists believe Nurcholish's call is no longer valid in the reform era. Some of them even suspect Nurcholish of colluding with Soeharto's New Order regime. It seems that the clear-cut division of the world into "Muslims and infidels" has gradually overshadowed the progressive thoughts of Nurcholish. Second, the practice of polygamy by politicians and public figures is also big news. It is true that in most democratic countries sex scandals often accompany politics. However, the recent practice in Indonesia is being justified by certain interpretations of religious teachings.

Third, there are some internal problems facing moderate Islamic political parties. The PKB (National Awakening Party), whose voters are mainly NU members, is being riven by internal

conflict between Muhaimin Iskandar's faction and that of Alwi Shihab. Although the dispute was settled in court, the two camps are unreconciled and this will weaken the party and endanger its preparations for the next general election.

Likewise, the PAN (National Mandate Party), which is associated with Muhammadiyah, has seen the departure of discontented young members, who have now established their own party that will also rely on support from Muhammadiyah.

If the PKB and PAN's potential voters are confused, where will they go? It stands to reason they will choose either the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) or the PPP (United Development Party), which both share an Islamist ideology.

Fourth, the political and educational campaigns of NU and Muhammadiyah are not as intensive as that of the tarbiyah, or educational, wing of the PKS. This is evident in the frequent activities the PKS has held involving public lectures and training programs. It would also be a mistake to blame President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's policy for this situation. His commitment to countering radicalism is quite clear. However, there is also the opinion that problem rests in his administration. Former president Abdurrachman Wahid, unlike Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, used to promote more cultural interpretations of Islam. Perhaps because of his respect for Javanese culture and harmony, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono seems indecisive when it comes to the formalization of sharia and is opting for a wait-and-see approach.

It is true the reform movement has brought in openness and freedom. These days, everyone can express their political and ideological choices. However, it should be kept in mind that we should not exercise freedom to threaten freedom. The country's history is proof enough that extremism -- from either the left or right -- creates nothing but more trouble and disorder.***

Increased radicalism: The failure of moderate Islam

Yogyakarta, May 16, 2011

There is moderate Islam like there is moderate Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism or even Marxism. However, lately we have been confronted mostly with "radical Islam" or worse "terrorism" in the name of Islam.

Islam, an ancient religion born in the Arabian Peninsula during late antiquity and related to an older Semitic religious tradition to which Judaism and Christianity also belong, has recently become a brand name for various bomb and suicide attacks.

Minority radical Muslims have hijacked Islam to justify their new radical faith. According to those radicals, the current world has deviated from the truth of Islam. Democracy embraced by most nations in the world, including Muslim nations, is seen as incompatible with Islamic dogma.

Moderate Islam, practiced by moderate Muslims around the world for 1,500 years, seems to have become extinct. Islam, like any other religion in the world that teaches spirituality and life after death, appears to challenge the current order of the world and to replace it with that of an "imagined" ancient religious dogmatic society.

Islamic radicalism has become a safe haven for those who are dissatisfied with the fast progress of the current world and those who feel marginalized within harsh global competition. This world is then blamed for its disagreement with old concepts of religious norms. In this regard, radical Muslims always pursue a dream to transform current society to the society in the Medina of the seventh century.

Radicals imagine that society in Medina then was the most ideal society in human history and guided by prophetic revelation. This can be achieved with all necessary cost and means. As in communism with a Machiavellian touch, violence is often used as a means to achieve a goal. Whereas Islam is old, radical Islam is a new school of thought emerging in a modern global context.

Islam came to Indonesia in the 13th century, and has become a political power since the 16th century. Indonesian Muslims have practiced Islam for five centuries.

But, they retained their local identity, tradition and culture. Indonesian Muslim women did not wear veils but traditional clothes that varied from one province to another. Indonesian Muslim men wore *songkok* (a traditional hat) and sarong, not the long gamis and turbans worn by their Middle Eastern counterparts.

Indonesians rarely grew beards, which have now become a sign of piety in certain Islamic circles. Unlike the pants worn by members of the Taliban, their pants are long, reaching their ankles. They eat rice, not *khubz* (Arab bread). They like sambal, not *hummus*.

In the current development, Islam in Indonesia has been used to assault people of other faiths, or other Muslims from different schools of thought. The peaceful Islam in Indonesia seems like an old story. This and the next generation will only listen to the story that Muslims used to be neighbors to Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and other people embracing other faiths. Those who still hold the idea of old inter-religious harmony are strangers in their own community.

In the current blatant process of "Talibanization" and "Pakistanization", Indonesian Islam has turned out to be a new radical religion. Religious attributes, clothes, the increase in the number of mosques, religious expressions in the public domain

and various attempts to sell religious sentiments in politics are nothing but indications of the resurgence of Islamic radicalism. There is little room, if any, left for moderation in practicing Islam in this country.

The radical voice has dominated the public, whereas moderate Muslims remain silent, failing to speak out and unwilling to preach their moderate faith and practices. They somehow let the radicals speak on behalf of their religion and watch their actions on TV. They seem to condemn extremism but not harshly enough.

Since I returned to Indonesia from Germany last year, I attended various conferences on Islam and Indonesia, among them were the "Annual Conference on Islamic Studies" held by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, in November 2010; the "International Yale Indonesia Forum" held by the University of Diponegoro in Semarang in July 2010; the "Resurgence of Religions in Southeast Asia" held by Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta in January 2011. Some notable Indonesianists and Islamicists in these conferences came to the conclusion that Islamic radicalism and fundamentalism was on the rise in the archipelago. Indonesian Islam is therefore jeopardized.

Our ears have gotten used to hearing bombs, which have indeed already penetrated Indonesian Islam's dictionary – three bombs disguised in books, a suicide bomb in Cirebon, a bomb attempt found near a gas pipeline close to a Catholic church in Tangerang and perhaps many more to come.

If these bomb threats on behalf of Islam continue uninterrupted, "Islam" and "bomb" will be tied together more tightly. As soon as the word Islam is pronounced, our imagination will be drawn to the idea of a "dangerous explosion".

What is so shocking is that few students from the State Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah in Jakarta – where the ideas of notable liberal Muslim scholars such as Nurcholish Madjid, Harun Nasution, Azyumardi Azra and many others have incubated – were involved in the recent wave of radicalism.

On the other hand, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah, two major Islamic organizations that should serve as pillars for moderate Islam in Indonesia, have failed to "delegitimize" Islamic radicalism. Worse still, radical ideas have

penetrated the two organizations.

Some leaders and young members of the two organizations demonstrate their radical views publicly. They support the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) threatening actions and denounce their own fellows accused of embracing liberal stances.

It is uncertain whether the leaders of the two organizations just enjoy the support of radical members for political benefit or if they do not care about the latest developments within their organizations. It is indeed dangerous if these religious leaders prioritize their personal agendas of political pragmatism while neglecting the broader nation's interest.

Bear in mind that there is no remedy for Islamic radicalism coming from outside the Muslim community, particularly one's with alien power, using unfamiliar languages. Any attempt to cure the radical virus from outside Islam will likely be doomed to failure. Power outside Islam is regarded as alien, the enemy of Islam. Bans on the total veil (*burqa*) in France, for instance, will become a legitimate reason for radical Muslims to denounce the hegemony of the West with which Muslim progressive intellectuals are often associated.

Indeed, NU, Muhammadiyah, *madrasah* (Islamic schools), *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) and Islamic institutes and universities spread across Indonesia should play a greater role in curbing the quick expansion of radicalism. Particularly the hearts and minds of the young generation should be shielded from any dangerous radical seduction.

These Islamic institutions, supported by the government, should shoulder the task. It is better now than too late, before a religious edict of prohibition of becoming a moderate Muslim is issued by the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council), and another bomb is placed in front of your office's door.

Islamic radicalism has become a safe haven for those who are dissatisfied with the fast progress of the current world and those who feel marginalized within harsh global competition.***

The Preventive approach to terrorism

Yogyakarta, May 24, 2010

The saga of "terrorist" hunting goes on in Indonesia. More targets are killed. More suspects' names are detected. This news coincides with the hotter news of chasing down those suspected of corruption. What a hard task for us Indonesians!

Many TV stations broadcast the drama of the chases, the arrests, and the shootings, as dramatically as scenarios in Hollywood movies. Of course, the former is more real than the latter.

Some Indonesian commentators, who appear in the electronic media, criticize this approach employed by our policemen, which is seen as curative rather than preventive.

It is true that shooting people is cruel. Some lawyers remind us that "terrorists" are also human beings who deserve humane treatment. They should not be treated like the objects of a hunting game. Consider too that they also have families and friends who watch TV every day. It is not hard to imagine how these friends and family members feel when their friend or relative is discredited in the media and chased by the police. Note that their children may want to take revenge.

However, what these commentators call preventive is still ambiguous. The Densus 88 anti-terror squad's approach is curative.

No doubt. The team extinguishes a fire that is already burning.

A preventive approach is not the burden of the anti-terror squad. The preventive approach is a long-term task which should be shouldered by Indonesian society through educational institutions - be they formal, such as schools and universities, or informal such as *pesantren* (traditional boarding schools) or mosque groups. These institutions should give a balanced view of reason and religion, religious duty and humanity, dogma and history, and between the content of the scriptures and their interpretation.

Bear in mind that we have to be prepared to be bold when talking about a preventive approach, particularly with regard to any possible relationship between terrorism and conservatism.

Of course, conservatism does not automatically mean terrorism. However, terrorism is a violent act as a result of radical ideology, which conservatism often harbors. It cannot be automatically assumed that those who embrace a conservative ideology are those who agree with acts of violence.

However, conservatism often shares a "black and white", ideology which radicals wholeheartedly advocate and spread. In their rhetoric, they sharpen the division of people between believers and unbelievers. You are either with us, the believers, or against us, the unbelievers!

Think why the soil of Aceh, where sharia and conservative ideas found fertile ground, became the radicals' choice. Radicals hope that a conservative land is a safe place to exercise their plan. We, on the other hand, hope that they are wrong in that the Acehnese refuse to be dictated by radicals. Of course, radicalism is alien to any culture, except when a land is in crisis or at war. The crisis in Aceh is over. Yet conservatism is still on the rise there, like anywhere else in Indonesia.

Conservatism somehow gives room to the seeds of radicalism. In a heart where people are divided merely on their faith; where the line is sharply drawn between the faithful and unfaithful; where friendship and brotherhood is restricted by faith; and where a human being are seen as unequal due to his beliefs - the germ of radicalism can spread.

Unfortunately, we Indonesians over the past five years have not paid enough attention to the growing conservatism in the public

space and educational institutions.

Compared to five years ago, wearing a veil has now become more of a trend not only in religious and public schools but also in traditional markets. Five years ago, when I went along a main road in Yogyakarta in the mornings, I still saw the hair of pretty girls in uniform riding bikes on their way to school. Now, their hair is hidden under headscarves, and they ride motorcycles. Likewise, in the traditional markets, such as the ones in front of the Prambanan and Kalasan temples, you can easily spot vendors with veils.

We Indonesians are eager to build more mosques, which are often left empty. Indeed, more and more mosques are being built in my neighborhood in my kampong in East Java and in my current town of Yogyakarta. Ironically, there is no significant activity in the mosques except for the call to prayer from the loudspeakers at dawn prayer time (*maghrib*). Children do not even receive religious lessons (*ngaji*) in these mosques.

Currently, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is worried about himself and other Indonesian political leaders, who have become the targets of terrorists. He should be more worried about the current growth of conservatism, and the latent threat it poses in the long term for future generations.***

Identifying an Indonesian 'Osama'

Yogyakarta, May 27, 2011

Although Osama bin Laden was killed, radicalism on behalf of Islam – as some of the groomed "heirs" to the throne of al-Qaeda have vowed to avenge the blood of the mastermind and many pundits have prophesized in various media – looks to live on. With or without Osama, extremism, which has given birth to various atrocities, bombs and suicide attacks, goes on.

A bomb exploded in Pakistan a week after Osama's death. In Surakarta, hundreds of men masked their faces as they took an oath on the street rallying to retaliate. A few days later, the anti-terror squad arrested and shot dead more suspected "terrorists" in neighboring Sukoharjo.

With or without Osama, the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) holds its radical faith firmly. This group publicly mourned the death of Osama, whom they regarded as a martyr, and condemned United States President Barack Obama, whose figure embodied the super power.

Grief, however, does not weaken the FPI's spirit. Nor does it stop them from thinking of a new agenda. This group showed their teeth and fangs in attempting to halt Hanung Bramantyo's

pluralism-themed film in Bandung.

It appears that the pundits' prophecies and the radicals' vengeances were fulfilled. But be prepared to see more.

For two decades, Osama's simple rhetoric filled the air we breathed. His curse of the superpower's hegemony remains enshrined and is repeated in the Internet, Facebook, blogs and Twitter. Due to its simplicity, people easily understand the logic. But with this reasoning, radicals have failed to cope with the reality. They can never comprehend this world's complexity. Nor can they accept their own defeat.

In whose figure in Indonesia can Osama's be compared?

According to Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, a firebrand radical preacher from Ngruki, Sukoharjo whose excessive media coverage has sparked envy from rival jihadist preachers, he is the one whose reputation in terms of *jihad* is comparable to that of Osama's. It is unclear whether Ba'asyir is proud or unhappy when surrounded by the tight security forces in the court. What is obvious is that he imagines himself as Osama, whose death and life has become a subject of a never-ending debate.

Indeed, between Bin Laden and Ba'asyir there are some points worthy of comparison.

Of course the two share the same perceptions about a clear-cut division of the world into believers and infidels, perpetual wars against infidels and formation of jihadist networks that operate beyond country and nation.

Both see secular government as the main obstacle in their bid to establish an Islamic caliphate. Both Bin Laden and Ba'asyir detest America, which they regard as the enemy of Islam. The two also cursed their own countries. While Bin Laden condemned Saudi Arabia for its relation with the United States government, Ba'asyir denounced the Indonesian government and called President Yudhoyono an infidel – a serious offense which the President seems to have never taken into account.

No proof confirms that Baasyir's network falls under the command of Osama directly. However, the former hailed the latter on many occasions. Unlike Ba'asyir, top terrorists Umar Patek, Hambali, Noordin M. Top and Abu Jibril were Afghanistan jihadi alumni whose bonds with Osama were strong. According to a

source, Ba'asyir visited Afghanistan, but what he did during his stay there remains unclear.

What is the difference between Osama and Ba'asyir?

While Osama proudly showed his responsibilities for many atrocities, one of which was the 9/11 attack, Ba'asyir has always denied his role in the acts of terror targeting Indonesia. It is tricky business, as Ba'asyir preaches hatred and often hails jihadist actions but denies playing a role.

Does Ba'asyir's reputation match that of Osama? It seems unlikely. True, Baasyir is a symbol of Indonesian radicalism for his critical role in propagating the core ideology of Islamism – a role that Osama also played well.

However, unlike Osama, Ba'asyir is likely not a foot soldier. Nor is he a commander in the field. But he is somehow in the network taking part as an ideologue and perhaps also fundraiser. Thus, Ba'asyir is a half of Osama.

To whom is Osama comparable in Indonesia? Osama is a combination of an image builder like Ba'asyir and a foot soldier like Noordin M. Top, Abu Dujana, Hambali, Azahari and Umar Patek, whom Baasyir knows well. And Osama's threat to the public is as latent as those made by the FPI.***

Preachers and conservatism in RI

Yogyakarta, July 15, 2011

The career of the late Zainuddin MZ, known as a preacher to a million followers, tells us about another side of Indonesian Muslims' religiosity.

Indonesians are fond of religious preachers. Religion, and religious piety, has dominated the public for a long time. Religion is a vital element to control Indonesian politics.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Indonesia witnessed several religious preachers who came and went. Good fortune sided with those who entertained the public with religious jargon and terms. These preachers mixed the ingredients of religious advice and humor, which were easily understood by Indonesians.

From the 1980s to the early 1990s, Zainuddin was a rising star. His speeches were broadcast on radio and TV, and were recorded in cassettes and CDs, which are still widely sold. Nobody could mistake Zainuddin's voice — the ways in which he greeted the audience, told funny jokes, and closed speeches.

Additionally, some preachers were often critical of the New Order regime. I still remember that when I was in senior high school, a mosque in my village had difficulty getting permission from the

local authority to invite a preacher, who had a reputation for his harsh criticism of the New Order regime's policies on Islam.

Indeed, Soeharto was careful about "political Islam" and any seeds of radicalism, which might endanger the government. Police often monitored religious ceremonies. Religious preachers were often accused of inciting hatred against the government. Any use of religion in public was deemed dangerous.

On the other hand, religious speeches were indeed essential elements in various Islamic ceremonies, such as *the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (Maulid), memorizing the day the Koran was sent down to earth (Nuzul al-Qur'an), and the evening journey of the Prophet to Jerusalem and the heavens (Isra Mi'raj)*.

As far as the public is concerned, Syukran Makmun came prior to Zainuddin's fame. But Makmun's hoarse voice is often monotonous. His jokes are not always funny. By contrast, Zainuddin successfully managed his tone. He created many amusing anecdotes.

Zainuddin's career is perhaps comparable only to that of Abdullah Gymnastiar, aka Aa Gym, who, unlike Makmun and Zainuddin, was not trained at a *pesantren* (traditional religious boarding school).

Besides Aa Gym's charisma, and his calm and tranquil performances on the stage that charmed Indonesian Muslims, particularly women, the media contributed greatly to Aa Gym's success. Indeed, it is the media and method, not particularly the message, which played a vital role in Aa Gym's public show.

Whereas Zainuddin's speeches often contained theological and complicated religious matter, Aa Gym's messages are often modest, humble and plain, dealing mostly with ordinary daily life.

Later generations of public religious preachers, from Arifin Ilham, Hariyanto, Yusuf Mansur, Mamah Dede, Jefry al Bukhori, to Maulana, more or less walked in Aa Gym's footsteps. Instead of religious messages, most of them exploited the media to cover their stage performances.

Religious sermons, like soap operas, comedy shows, and other TV programs, have turned out to be public entertainment.

Note that the media, which raised the figure of Aa Gym, also caused his tragic fall. His second marriage, which cannot be accepted by his first wife, was blown up. Thus, the media played a

critical role in the rise and fall of Indonesian religious preachers.

The role of religious preachers in the Indonesian public domain indicates that the people still deemed oral traditions as higher than reading. To listen to preachers giving speeches entails less effort than reading books. In various ceremonies, religious speeches were important elements that some people enjoyed. They seemed thirsty for religious advice and humorous anecdotes. Struggling with their own hard lives, they wanted to listen to the stories of an eternal comfortable life in paradise in the hereafter.

However, not only do most preachers undermine life in this world — which is indeed temporary — compared to the eternal world after life, they also ridiculed science, logic and reason. On the pulpits, many preachers challenged scientific discoveries, which, according to their belief, were untenable. They then called upon the audience to return to "piety" and religious dogma. They stressed that human reasoning can never surpass religion.

Indeed, religious speeches have nurtured conservatism, fundamentalism and even radicalism.

Many commentators and pundits have so far concluded that radicalism is not an indigenous character of Indonesian Islam. Many have pinpointed that radicalism in the country came from outside influences brought by transnational organizations and networks, such as the JI (Jamaah Islamiyah).

However, we should not neglect the role of religious preachers' messages broadcast for more than three decades on radios and TVs every day. People are used to listening to religious dogma, which they prefer to logic and reasoning.***

Islamic congress reflects conservative influence

Yogyakarta, February 14, 2015

On Feb. 8-11 the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) held the sixth Congress of Indonesian Muslims in Yogyakarta, opened by Vice President Jusuf Kalla and closed by President Joko Widodo (Jokowi).

The congress announced seven recommendations.

First, it called on Indonesian Muslims "to unite and work together [...] for political, economic, social and cultural strengthening [...] which is just and civilized".

Second, it called on the government and political forces "to abandon politics which justify all means, to make politics a way to realize national well-being, prosperity, security and peace".

Third, the government should "take the side of the poor […] by developing a people-centered economy oriented to equal distribution and justice, and support the development of a sharia-based economy".

Fourth, the congress appealed to Muslims to "empower themselves, develop economic potential, human resources and strengthen micro, small and medium businesses based in mass organizations, mosques and pesantren [Islamic boarding

schools]".

Fifth, the congress called on the government and society "to be on the alert and keep oneself away from cultures incompatible with Islamic sharia and the nation's noble culture such as drug abuse, liquor, pornography […], free intimacy [and casual sex] and human trafficking".

Sixth, the congress expressed "concern on the shifting of landscape and spatial planning in Indonesian life in many areas which have abandoned Islamic characteristics due to massive liberalization of culture and the economy".

Seventh, the congress expressed concern over "the condition of Muslims in several countries […] particularly in Asia where they experience discrimination. The congress requests the governments of the said countries to assure protection" of the Muslim communities "based on fair and civilized principles of human rights".

The recommendations reflect the congress process, which was dominated by conservative voices. In all forums, conservatives groups, such as the MIUMI (Council of Young Indonesian Intellectuals and Ulema), the MMI (Indonesian Mujahidin Council), the Council of Indonesian Jihadi, the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) and HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) organization, among other conservative groups, raised their voices as loudly as possible, so that the voices of moderates could not be heard.

Moderate organizations, mainly NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah, which have characterized moderate Indonesian Islam, played minor roles in the congress. Only a few progressive intellectuals — such as Azyumardi Azra, Komaruddin Hidayat and Masdar F. Mas'udi — simply gave speeches and did not follow the discussions intensively.

Let us examine a few of the recommendations. The first, which calls upon unity in politics, reflects Islamist political parties' struggle to gain Muslim voters. It mirrors Islamist politicians' frustrations, as their parties have been easily defeated by nationalist and secular parties from one general election to another.

By calling on Muslims to unite, they mean that Muslims should choose an Islamist party and support all efforts made by Islamist politicians in the national power contest. Indeed, the congress was attended by many Islamist politicians, such as

Ahmad Heryawan, the West Java governor supported by the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), and Djan Faridz, a politician with the PPP (United Development Party). Some HTI activists brought up the system of *khilafah* (caliphate), though they disagree with the current IS (Islamic State) movement in Syria and Iraq. This suggestion was not taken up.

The third recommendation is a softened version of protracted debates on sharia. The actual mention of sharia, also in the fifth point, barely hides Islamists' ambition for state recognition of sharia through its laws and institutions — though toned down in the appeal on supporting small-scale entrepreneurship in mosques, pesantren and societal organizations.

The last three recommendations show the spirit of conservatism within the MUI. The fifth recommendation to be "on the alert" of cultures "incompatible with Islamic sharia" can be used as justification for radical organizations such as the FPI in Jakarta and the FJI (Islamic Jihad Front) in Yogyakarta, which have forced many stores suspected of selling liquor to close.

The voice of antipornography is also in line with the two radical groups, which limit the freedom of women; in 2013 the FJI was among those protesting the Miss Universe contest held in Bali.

The fifth recommendation underlines a previous fatwa of the MUI that deemed secularism, pluralism and liberalism as *haram* (forbidden under Islam) without elaborating on what these words mean.

The last recommendation clearly shows the zealous apologetic attitude, if not total ignorance, taken by the MUI regarding discriminatory and violent actions against minorities — such as against churches, the Ahmadiyah, Shiites and followers of other local faiths. Instead the congress only points to discrimination against Muslims overseas. As an Indonesian proverb says, "an elephant in front of your eyes is invisible, whereas a germ across the seas is obvious".

Interestingly, some members of the congress reject the term bughat (rebel factions) for those who rebelled against the state. They ironically use the word to refer to some minority faiths.

In short, the MUI has increasingly become the voice

of conservatism and radicalism. Some activists of moderate organizations joined secular NGOs and political parties instead.

This is a task for Indonesian Muslims and the government to tame radicalism in the council before it is too late.***

The banal rhetoric of imperialism, colonialism

Yogyakarta, April 08, 2011

The current campaign waged by the United States and its allies against Col. Muammar Qaddafi's merciless dictatorship also entails a war of ideas.

Qaddafi and his followers have shielded themselves from democratic protesters with a predictable and boring rhetoric of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism.

Libya will be occupied by the West, just as Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam were occupied! Colonial powers harbor nothing but jealousy of the Third World's advancing wealth! Oil is at the root of every problem!

The rhetoric evokes the bitter experience of the Islamic world under a long period of Western colonialism. It is not surprising that the United States and its allies have been branded as crusading armies bent on destroying their Muslim enemies.

Conspiracy theorists have already drawn analogies between colonialism and the recent Libya campaign. Some Indonesian politicians have promoted this rhetoric in public. Whether anyone wants to listen is a different issue.

Hidayat Nur Wahid, a senior politician of the PKS (Prosperous

Justice Party), said that the goal of the current war in Libya was "to seize the nation's oil", adding that "European countries have suffered from an economic recession. They need new resources to revive their economy."

It sounds like the rhetoric of Iranian president Ahmadinejad, except in an Indonesian format. Compare Hidayat's words with those of Ahmadinejad on the Libyan crisis: "The Westerners have to cast aside their colonialist ambitions."

The rhetoric of imperialism and colonialism can also be found in the case of Ahmadiyah, the minority Islamic sect that has suffered repeated harassment at the hands of Indonesian radicals.

According to the hard-liners, the European Union, the United Nations and United States congressmen asked the Indonesian government to pay serious attention to the plight of Ahmadiyah. Many Indonesian officials, rather than heeding their warnings, fired back at perceived international pressure.

Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi, for instance, rejected demands to revoke laws that discriminate against the Islamic sect. Gamawan's response to the United States congressmen does not surprise us, as he warmly welcomed the FPI leaders' proposal to disband the group. You can guess which faction the man sides with.

On March 23, I was invited to speak at the Ministry of Religious Affairs's dialogue and public hearing on Ahmadiyah that was held in Central Jakarta.

I made myself as clear as possible to other participants that the failure to protect any citizen of Indonesia means the beginning of the nation's collapse. I reminded the audience about the domino effect. After Ahmadiyah, the Shiite, Christian minority, and liberals, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah — all groups that are not considered purely "Islamic" by Islamists — will be targeted by the radicals.

I realized that most of the participants disagreed with me. Before my turn to speak I listened to members of the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) — an organization whose fame lies in their radical stances and terrifying tactics — give their threatening opinions.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs used to be a place where the idea of religious pluralism and other progressive concepts

were incubated under the leadership of A. Mukti Ali, Alamsjah Ratuprawiranegara and Munawir Sjadzali. Now the ministry has become a rendezvous for the FPI leaders.

I am afraid that Ahmadiyah will be disbanded by a more "authoritative" law, enacted after the government's "consults" with different groups.

In fact, nobody is sure that the government listened the sound judgments conveyed by scholars and activists at the seminar. As usual, politicians placed political interests ahead of all other concerns.

Religious Affairs Minister Suryadharma Ali, who also chairs the PPP (United Development Party), revealed his true colors.

At a conference in Samarinda he urged fellow party members not to hesitate to make Islam as an 'ideology' (*The Jakarta Post*, March 27, 2011). He also denounced liberal thinking (*The Jakarta Post*, Feb. 23, 2011).

Indeed, at the ministry's dialogue I heard a moderator provoke the audience when he said that the United States and Western powers were meddling in the case of Ahmadiyah — a form of intervention that we must not bow down to.

This rhetoric reminds us the way Abu Bakar Ba'asyir often defends himself in the court. He has repeatedly said that he was arrested under orders from the United States. The conspiracy theories then followed: the Indonesian government was a mere toy of the world superpower, the US.

I am afraid to draw some points of similarities among the opinions conveyed by Qaddafi, Ahmadinejad, Hidayat Nur Wahid, the FPI leaders, Ba'asyir, two of the President's current ministers and perhaps other state officials. I question to what extent radical thinking has penetrated the government.

Has this government and other political leaders already knelt down before the FPI's leaders?***

Hesitant government a loophole for radicalism

Yogyakarta, March 21, 2011

The recent bombs delivered in packages disguised as books sent to Ulil Abshar Abdalla, an activist of JIL (Liberal Islamic Network), and other prominent figures last week cannot be explained in plain and simple language.

Nor can it be pinpointed what caused someone to intimidate the public with the acts of terror. Although the perpetrators may be arrested, the root cause of the problem remains unaddressed.

The answer to this issue is complex. After a series of assaults on minority groups, Ahmadiyah, in many parts of Indonesia, the Christian minority in Temangung, Central Java, and the Shi'ite group in Pasuruan, East Java, and apparently now the liberal news network is being harassed. Who is next?

Just get ready, in case your group becomes the next target. In fact, with their blind dogmatic jihad, the radical perpetrators will never rest in their pursuit of finding new enemies.

Indeed, the series of these atrocities unfolded systematically, even though the perpetrators are most likely not the same group or people. But why did the radicals boldly intimidate the Indonesian public?

Do not look only at their conservative and radical theological dogma, according to which the last Prophet Muhammad is uncompromised in truth and liberalism is poisonous. The victims were blamed. After all, the alibis are just unfounded.

Attention should be given to the background against which their actions are executed. The weak central government is perhaps the first chief factor.

True, since the reform period, Indonesia has never seen a strong ruling government from the era of BJ Habibie to the current period of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Indonesians appear to learn well from the traumatic experiences under two authoritarian presidents —Sukarno and Soeharto.

They will not tolerate strong figures exercising excessive power, as in the case of Indonesian Soccer Association chairman Nurdin Halid. The nation is sensitive to any signs of dictatorship.

The wavering government, however, cannot effectively control both political and social development.

In response to many serious issues, the current SBY government has often been in limbo between many opposing views. It seemed that the government would like to please everyone. Satisfaction for all parties, unfortunately, is hard to achieve.

Ideally speaking, SBY, who was reelected with a landslide victory, should have high self-confidence to assume the presidency. In fact, SBY's steps were compromised by many interests.

Look at the issue of the cabinet reshuffle, a hesitant consideration—back and forth and from side to side—based on political interests rather than the performance and achievement of the ministers.

Government's hesitation is also visible in dealing with Ahmadiyah. The joint ministerial decree and

Attorney General shows how the government opted for a compromise rather than taking decisive steps.

The decree is unable to fulfill the demands of both common reason and radical logic. Ahmadiyah religious practices are banned, whereas those who attack the "deviant" groups will be punished. The ambiguity lies in the fact that the decree can be interpreted as either banning or protecting the minority. However, both interpretations rest in weak ground.

The cautious government can also be interpreted as cowardly. The judicial review of the outdated 1965 blasphemy law also failed. Common sense and reason were easily defeated.

Recently, the taunt by the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) leaders to topple SBY remains unanswered. The group grossly manipulated the democratic euphoria in the Middle East as an Islamist movement. Of course, the Indonesian public does not want to buy this falsehood.

As the government is indecisive, the law is not enforced firmly. Corruption scandals involving some important figures in the government cannot be brought to justice. Worse still, some graft cases have become political commodities and bargaining chips.

To illustrate, we are not sure the degree to which accusing someone of corruption, as in the case of KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission) deputy chiefs Bibit Samad Riyanto and Chandra Hamzah, is serious. It also appears that in certain high-profile crimes, such as the murder of human rights activist Munir, the masterminds remain at large and will be forgotten as a result of political compromises.

The hesitant government has left loopholes not only for radicals to be more outspoken, but also for the locals to run wild. Amid the euphoria of reform, Amien Rais proposed formation of federal states as an alternative of the unitary Republic of Indonesia. In fact, greater autonomy given to locals was a compromise that satisfied those demanding a federal system of government and those who were concerned about national unity.

However, local political elites have gone wild. They misused the broadened mandate at will, giving rise to corruption cases.

To win votes, the local politicians have also passed 90 local ordinances which clearly contradict the spirit of the Constitution.

The intellectual opposition is also weak at the local level, as intellectuals have mostly migrated to Jakarta for various reasons. Some of the bylaws impose forcefully sharia upon the people and discriminate against women.

The gubernatorial decrees on Ahmadiyah ban in East Java, West Java and Banten are the latest examples of the "small king" phenomenon.

We heard recently that President Yudhoyono and Constitu-

tional Court chief Mahfud MD promise to investigate to what extent these local elites ran counter the Constitution. However, their words have so far not materialized into actions.

In the absence of firm government, the local renegades and radicals will always find room to show off and the police will receive no political support to uphold the law.***

Between ideas and acts: Anticipating radicalism in 2011

Yogyakarta, December 20, 2010

In 2010, Indonesia witnessed the police's triumph, and in particular that of the special antiterrorist squad Densus 88, over terrorists.

The successful year was preceded by a long effort that peaked with the killing of top terrorist suspect Noordin M. Top in 2009.

However, terrorism is not a consequence of cause, but of result. Terrorism is an act triggered by ideas. The acts of terrorists do not stand alone. Ideology, plans, strategy and network precede these acts. Thus, if the police chase after these terrorists and eventually catch, or even shoot them, that would not mean an end to the story.

Ideas cannot be eradicated by the deaths of those who promoted them. People may die, but their ideas live on. In fact, the network runs well. Its gears of recruitment are still active. The cell system has operated confidentiality and the continuation of the movement can be guaranteed. When a group is annihilated, another group, with its robust branches, grows.

The cell system is in fact not new in Indonesian history. Communist movements — prior and after Indonesia declared independence — employed this tactic, with loyalty of and a mode of expansion that was impressive. With regard to this method of developing an organization, nowadays terrorism, particularly in Southeast Asia, and communism a long ago are deemed comparable.

Thus, we should not put the task of annihilating terrorism on the police alone, who will never be able to eradicate all aspects of terrorism. By the same token, do not persecute too many people, simply because they are suspected of having connections with certain radical groups.

Indonesians should learn more lessons from the way in which the communist movement was extinguished in 1965 under the banner of Soeharto's New Order. The regime imposed strict rule upon its own citizens by screening for signs of communism.

The New Order regime successfully frightened its own people. Communism was defined as Marxism which teaches atheism, according to which God does not exist — a doctrine that would destroy this nation.

If those who are suspected of terrorism are treated in the same way as those alleged communists were, old mistakes will be repeated. In fact, everybody, with no exception, deserves equality and unprejudiced treatment.

So far, the war against terrorism has been conducted through a campaign of hunting "terrorists". If this method is still employed in the future, the root cause of terrorism — namely the ideas that precede its actions — will remain untouched. In short, this method has a blatant flaw.

In fact, many Indonesians — who have boldly appeared in public and have had so far plenty of room and freedom to voice their radical dogmatic views — share the ideology that the terrorists embrace. To put it differently, the ideology firmly held by radicals is spreading in Indonesian society.

According to this ideology, the world is sharply divided between the believers and infidels, and war should be waged against those who fall into the second category.

Many mass organizations in this country — the FPI (Islam

Defenders Front), the HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia), the FUI (Islamic Community's Forum) and the MMI (Mujahidin Council of Indonesia) to mention but a few — exhibit dogmatic and narrow minded religious interpretations of various issues in Indonesia. Worse still, they intimidate the moderate majority Indonesian Muslims and non-Muslims.

These groups dictate the public by arrogantly showing that what they offer is the only "truth", whereas those who stand against them are categorized as misleading. In showing their might in response to many cases, they hold mass rallies on the streets, demanding the government meet their needs.

This can be seen in their responses to the pornography bill in the case of the *Playboy* magazine chief editor, of Ariel's and Luna Maya's video tape, their demand to remove Obama's statue in Menteng, and many others. Unfortunately, the government often gives into their demands.

In imposing their dogma upon the public, these groups also demonstrate their "shallow" reasoning in the media. They force the public to follow the way they think.

This can be seen in the way in which they articulate arguments in defending their atrocities, such as the stabbing of priests in Ciketing, Bekasi, the mass attack on Ahmadiyah, their support for Sharia local ordinances, and their support for all edicts pronounced by the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council).

The HTI also relentlessly promotes their most valuable commodity, namely *khilafah* (a traditional Islamic system of monarchy). No matter how sophisticatedly some experts of Islam already can explain the concept of true ancient *khilafah*, which is very different from theirs, this group persistently hold that their own concept of *khilafah* should replace the current democracy we are nurturing.

Apparently, Indonesians are not interested in buying into any Islamist agenda in politics. The people prefer secular political parties to Islamist parties. Learning lessons from this, the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) has applied a new gambit. To fix their image, this "Islamist" party states that they intend to accept the values of pluralism as clearly defined by Pancasila (the Five Principles). Nobody, except God, knows whether they are telling the truth or

not.

Nevertheless, the Indonesian future generation is still at stake. In fact, radical ideas have already penetrated public schools, universities and mosques.

In the curriculum set up for these educational institutions, religion, particularly Islam, is treated as a mere symbol rather than as a set of ideal moral values and spirituality. As a result, more female students wear veils (*jilbab*) in order to look pious. The spirit of tolerance, and inter-faith dialogue is not being cultivated.

Thus, in 2011, the campaign should be waged not only against the acts of terrorism but also against the root causes of this, namely ideas and ideology, from which terrorists were inspired to commit atrocities. Never underestimate ideas.***

Welcoming a guest and de-radicalization

Bochum, April 05, 2010

Two harrowing incidents - the police gunning down Southeast Asia's most wanted radical and the mass rallies protesting President Barack Obama's visit to Indonesia - distracted the Indonesian public's welcome to the president's *pulang kampung* (coming home).

The term was coined to indicate that Indonesians expect a lot from the visit. However, the visit, like anything else in the world, fails to make everybody happy. There is no magical thing in the world that can ensure universal satisfaction.

The visit, many hope, should bear fruit in the political, economical and social relationships between the archipelagic country and Uncle Sam's country, between those who wear a sarong and those who wear a cowboy hat, between Andy Warhol's country and Afandi's, between the heirs of John F. Kennedy's dream and those who want to keep Sukarno's legacy alive, between those who enjoy country and jazz music and those who enjoy *keroncong* and *dangdut*, and between the country whose seal reads *Pluribus e Unum* and that which reads *Bhinneka Tunggal Eka* - both mottoes emphasize diversity and unity.

Radicals are of course, are not pleased with the visit, which will be celebrated by other Indonesians who "revere" Obama. These radicals will never give up entirely. Rather, they seized the golden opportunity to show to the public that they - including their movement and agenda - are still alive. To them, showing up as a huge crowd in protest of the visit is important. So is drawing parallels between the current war in Afghanistan, inherited by Obama, with the wars waged by his predecessor.

It appears that the content of their demands are not the radicals' true goal. Nor is logical thought. They just keep moving in influencing the media and the public (see Ismail Yusanto, *The Jakarta Post*, March 5, 2010). They seem to boast: "Look at us, we are still here; we move among you; our voices are still important; many support us; no matter how many of those you slay whose ideas of caliphate and sharia we share, we can still protest against your plan to welcome Obama."

They realize that their efforts in gathering as many people as they can on the streets will never influence the planned visit. Yet, for them, their public exercise is much more important than the reality that we know. To such a movement, dreams are deemed higher than reality.

The MUI (The Indonesian Ulama Council), on the other hand, shows wisdom, refusing to pronounce an edict which prohibits the visit of Obama. As a rule, the president should be welcomed and respected in at least the way he was in Cairo, where he delivered an eloquent speech.

In terms of security, for the sake of people in the long run and for "the guest," whose arrival has been delayed, the police have showed good work ethic. Praises have been bestowed upon them. The list of fugitives' names decreased one by one.

However, shooting and chasing the perpetrators will never suit the long program of de-radicalization. That the fugitives are scared and therefore hide somewhere in a remote island or in a crowded neighborhood does not mean that they stop spreading their teachings. In fact, they consolidate their power.

Shielding the next generation from radical ideologies should be the highest priority.

In this regard, two ministerial offices, the National Education Ministry and Ministry of Religious Affairs, are responsible for

putting this into practice. The former should seriously think about issues aside from the national exams, whereas the latter should focus its attention not merely on the lucrative haj business. Both, however, should be in the front row in thinking of de-radicalization programs in the long run.

Muhammad Nuh, the current of education minister who was educated in Paris, must realize how important is to guard our system of education from the seeds of religious conservatism before it is too late. Students should not only know about one religion, but many religions.

They should be taught not only about the content of different religions but also about the history of religions.

They should not only be asked to practice a certain religion and its ethic, but also be told how religions emerged in this world.

For instance, reciting the Koran, a common practice reportedly found from elementary to high schools, should be accompanied by the history of the scripture itself.

Suryadharma Ali, the current minister of religious affairs minister whose background is NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), should also further summon students from Islamic universities to hold cultural perspective in viewing their own religion.

Religious dialogue should not only be promoted in hotels and be the knowledge of elite intellectuals, but be developed into common knowledge for all students and people.

De-radicalization programs in the long run should not be put on the shoulders of anti error unit Detachment 88, whose job is to hunt down perpetrators, who have been taught about Islam and this world in the wrong way.

In cases of radicalization, prevention is the cure, for the sake of future generations.***

CHAPTER FOUR
MORALITY IN PUBLIC

Between fake and true morality

Yogyakarta, April 19, 2011

The public wonders why the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) paid more attention to the case of Arifinto, a legislator who was caught red-handed watching a porn movie during a House of Representatives plenary session, than to Misbakhun's involvement in "Centurygate".

While pornography may disturb one person's mentality, corruption can lead to the destruction of the whole system. Pornography violates only a sexual taboo, while corruption causes damage to the nation's morality.

Well, this can be answered simply. Pornography is much simpler than corruption, although both cannot be avoided by party leaders. Arifinto was indeed alone in watching the video, whereas Misbakhun must have worked with a "team".

Corruption often involves various agents working together as a team. Melinda Dee, who is accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the Citibank where she worked, was never alone. Investigations have so far found that she had a network and teammates.

If Misbakhun was forced to resign, it would cost only his political career for a moment. The faces of other members of the party — who also have likely ever taken pleasure in watching porn (in fact, in many meetings that have taken place in various hotels parliament members may have watched porn movies) — can be saved.

The public is again deceived with the hope that the case is simply dismissed due to the resignation of the wrongdoer, who publicly repented by evoking God's name.

In this vein, religion plays its part in politics. It is a salvation for both the politician and the party.

Arifinto's sins, and his party's damaged name, are washed. End of story.

Indeed, pornography is the only safe haven where the PKS can harbor, as the image of the "clean" party as a political brand has been marred by various allegations of corruption in the elite body of the party.

Yusuf Supendi's accusation of some PKS elites, e.g. Lutfi Hassan Ishaq, Anis Matta, Hilmy Aminuddin having been involved in various scandals, is a case in point.

True, the PKS has been outspoken in imposing the pornography bill. This party is also an ardent supporter of imposing the code ethic of the members of the parliament.

Back to the main story. As Arifinto announced his own resignation from the House of Representatives, the party attempted to transform the image of Arifinto from a taboo breaker into a hero.

In response to this, Anis Baswedan, a young Indonesian intellectual, questioned that "there is no justification when the one who should be punished can become a hero".

It is true that resignation is very rare in the Indonesian political stage. Neither Nurdin Halid, the PSSI (Indonesian Soccer Association) embattled leader nor Misbakhun ever declare their own resignation.

The PKS leaders, on the other hand, want to show the step taken by Arifinto as an example. However, Baswedan is skeptical and put it that "in the case of Arifinto nothing is extraordinary. Let him resign, when necessary pressure should be given to force him

to resign".

To be clear, the PKS did double naiveties. Its member broke the highest taboo that the party itself has set and the wrongdoer is claimed to be a hero.

Of course politicians want to stick on the "fake morality" which is easily defended rather than holding the true morality, consisting of integrity and honesty, which is hard to stand for. Morality based merely on pornography is phony, as this can be twisted easily.

The websites containing of pornographic material can be easily blocked, as Tifatul Sembiring is ready to die for it.

On the other hand, political integrity and honesty is a broad concept, one of whose manifestation is a combat against corruption — a struggle that is still a long way to go in this country.

The PKS has so far built the image as a clean political party, by which its politicians claimed the party's distinguished characters from those of other parties.

However, the image has recently been tainted by corruption allegation scandals in the PKS elites.

In this vein, there is a shifting notion in the meaning of "cleanness." Cleanness from corruption seems hard to maintain, whereas cleanness from pornography can easily be manipulated.

The PKS has already chosen its path. Yes, the PKS politicians, like some of us, can still watch porn movies or images, but only Arifinto receive disciplinary sanction. That is enough for the sake of public's scrutiny.

Do not blame the PKS politicians too much, as the attitude adopted by them mirrors our own characters as a nation.

Morality for some of us is interpreted only as a compensation for some pleasures, such as pornography, alcoholic beverage, or sexual affairs, which we give up in the public. Morality often refers to the old definition found in religious dogma, which has no relation to the current reality.

We are lenient with violence to true morality, such as corruption, massacre, oppression, abuse of power, and other crimes, which cause destruction to the nation.

Fake morality is much simpler to be understood and easier to be implemented than the true one.

Yes, the plan of building parliament's house, which will cost Rp

1.13 trillion (US$130 million), will receive the public's attention, and be remembered, much less than the case of Arifinto.***

Which standard of morality do you pick up?

Bochum, October 22, 2009

Lately, the Indonesian public has displayed many "standards of morality". At least two tendencies have been in opposition to each other.

There are those that intend to bring public morality back in line with the old religious values - basing their own interpretation on certain religious orthodoxy - and those who are critical of religious conservatism and radicalism playing a large role in the public sphere. Each has its own bargaining position in the eyes of Indonesians. The battle will always go on.

It appears that the proponents of religious morality have their moment now. Yes, Maria Ozawa, known as Miyabi, is unlikely to come to the country for her planned film *Menculik Miyabi* (Kidnapping Miyabi). The reason for her cancelled trip is clear - it is out of fear. As has always been the case, certain radical and conservative groups in the name of religion have denounced those who invited the movie star to visit the country.

The MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) chairman, Ma'ruf Amin, warned that her visit to Indonesia would damage the image of the country and have a negative effect on the people. According

to Ma'ruf, she may only come to the country if she intends to stop starring in porn movies.

Those who took to the streets reasserted the MUI's message, citing Miyabi as a symbol of immorality. To them, Indonesia is a "pious" nation, which should not be polluted with "porn". Who is not deterred?

This faction seems to have won this battle. From the beginning, the pro-Japanese movie star promised to dress appropriately.

To this point, Mohammad Nuh, the then communications and information minister, said there was no reason to reject her trip to this beautiful archipelago - which lured her forefathers to come here in 1942 to dethrone the Dutch.

"The public are neutral and will side with those whose courage is shown. However, beware of those who blur 'their ideology' for the sake of political opportunity."

What is so ironic, is that what kind of the Indonesian "image" the MUI leader intended to convey, is unclear. In fact, a huge number of Indonesian internet surfers have repeatedly searched "Miyabi" in Google for any links to her pictures. Glodok, a traditional electronic market in North Jakarta, has also been flooded with fake Miyabi movies of late.

What is more, the news about the trial of Antasari Azhar, a former leader of the KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission), which covers a certain level of "hot action", earned dozens of pages of comments.

The MUI leader is obviously not aware that Indonesians are enthusiastic about "hot stuff".

Nonetheless, looking at the war, pro-secular values have also scored well. Since the general election, the public has negatively branded those who mix religion with politics. Case in point: Political parties with religion as their basis seem to have lost their bargaining position.

These parties have not gained a significant number of votes. Nor have their cadres gained important positions in the House of Representatives in the aftermath of the election. Their hope now rests in some executive positions. Let us wait and see whether an Islamist party (i.e. the Prosperous Justice Party) can wrestle its "deteriorating" image.

What is clear is that even religious voters cast their votes to the more nationalist parties, while bargaining at the elite level has followed course.

Another damaging blast for conservatism and radicalism is that the public has cursed “terrorism”. True, the suicide bombers of the JW Marriott, Ibrohim, M. Jibril, Nordin M. Top, and Syaifuddin Zuhri earnt no sympathy at all from the public. Indonesians loathe violence in the name of religion. This can be seen in the comments made by the readers of many major Indonesian newspapers, e.g. Kompas or The Jakarta Post.

However, radicals never give up. They are always ready to smuggle their ideology anywhere they believe it can grow. Note that Zuhri and Syahrir were shot in the neighborhood of UIN (State Islamic University) of Jakarta, whose academia - e.g. Nurcholish Madjid, Harun Nasution, Djohan Efendi and their students - has been known for its pluralistic and secular ideas. Thus, beware of radical ideology, which has often been shrouded in the language of solidarity and piety.

Then, which standard of morality has won? Those of secularists, nationalists, moderates, liberals, or radicals?

Unfortunately, the public has no clear answer yet. Each has scored well. Yet each has lost certain points. Now, everything depends on whose voice is louder than the others, and who is best prepared to fight for their ideas.

The public are neutral and will side with those whose courage is shown. However, beware of those who blur “their ideology” for the sake of political opportunity.***

The evolution of human and animal rights

Yogyakarta, June 22, 2011

Ethics and norms, by which individuals have lived with others in society and by which culture and civilization have progressed, have changed over time.

Driyarkara, an Indonesian religious leader and philosopher whose contribution to the nation's struggle and development cannot be doubted, explained this in many of his works.

One can perhaps argue that ethics, an important human invention which in turn has prescribed how to behave with others properly, have progressed remarkably. Ancient and classical ethics, compared to modern ethics, sounds agonizing. Cruelty and brutality when attacking enemies, which are unbearable by modern standards, are painted on the canvases of ancient battles and wars.

The way in which men treated other men and other creatures has changed. In some ancient cultures, there are stories that kings maliciously beheaded their people. Those who opposed rulers were deemed criminals. Rebel leaders, considered sinners who acted not only against their rulers but also God, were crucified or hanged.

Thanks to modern democracy, which has guided us to be more

sensitive to forms of oppression and injustice, show our standard of ethics has improved. Regimes cannot simply put those who demand "openness" and "transparency" simply to death, as is happening in Libya, Syria and Yemen. Rulers, who are ordinary people (just like us, prone to mistakes) chosen by others, are not descended from gods or goddesses.

As people around the world have become a single community, any misbehavior committed by any regime will concern all members of the global community. The Middle Eastern political outcry, which has spread across Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria, is an issue not only for those who live in the region, but also those who live on other continents. We all realize that any political and economical turmoil in a certain region will affect the rest of the world.

People's basic rights can never be abused. Nor can animals' rights be neglected.

In many traditional societies, slaughtering animals for consumption can be cruel. But ethical standards are now improving. Before the world went online, torturing animals before their death could have been left unnoticed. But now, a record of slaughtering cows in the local slaughterhouses of Indonesia, and the way in which these animals were treated, has reached the global audience.

Despite continuing practices in many countries, the death penalty by way of hanging, shooting, injection and electrical shock, have now come under review. Protests by human rights activists against capital punishment are mounting.

Man is a carnivore. Killing other animals for food is unavoidable. But, current knowledge and technology show us how to kill animals with less torture.

During Idul Adha (the Islamic Day of Sacrifice), we witness people slaughtering chickens, goats and cows.

To slay a chicken, only two people are needed. One should hold two feet and wings, whereas the other can cut the throat. To kill a goat or cow, more people are involved. To calm down the might of the beasts, at least four people should hold the four feet tightly, whereas a man who is religiously authorized can cut the throat. Before their death, with blood bursting from the throat, these animals flounder.

For those who are not familiar with this traditional technique, it looks gruesome. On the other hand, modern procedures with shots, electricity and other methods can kill animals effectively and involves less torture.

Human life is sacred, Pope Benedict XVI said so. So is that of animals. Their lives and deaths should be respected.

However, evolution in human culture does not always run linearly. Some areas move forward. Others are backward. Notwithstanding the advancement of our knowledge about ethics and norms, we are still encountering abuses of human and animal lives.***

Corruption: From taboo to jokes

Yogyakarta, September 04, 2011

Even without a letter questioning President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's commitment to the fight against corruption (*The Jakarta Post*, Aug. 20, 2011), the public, and also perhaps the government, have long been aware of the grave danger of corruption.

When asked about corruption, Indonesians will point out how government and non-government institutions are mired in it.

The following is among the better known examples of small-scale corruption. You come to an office. A member of staff welcomes you, explaining the procedure to get something done, but the procedure sounds so complicated. Upon seeing your confusion and despair, a gratuity is suggested.

Alternatively you look for a "middle man" who can perhaps help you. In spite of a big board standing beside the front desk warning "Do not use the service of brokers", a middle man is always available in the back. This, like so much else in this country, seems paradoxical.

There are many well known forms of large-scale corruption: manipulation, marking up, money laundering, making fake reports,

counterfeit factories, etc.

Is it possible to find anywhere free from corruption?

The phantom of corruption haunts streets, offices, soccer fields, forests, seas, rivers, bridges, airports, bus terminals, train stations, schools and universities, even the very air, soil, and water.

Is it possible to imagine a time free from corruption?

Like rats, corruptors never stop; stealing public money from Monday to Sunday, from January to December, including the Independence Day anniversary, Ramadhan, Idul Fitri, Christmas, Nyepi, and other holy days.

Corruption is a public secret! This sounds like an absurd thing to say, but you understand it anyway.

Just look at public services, from the lowest level of administration in villages around the country to central government. You will bear witness to this ferocious cancer eating at the whole body.

Corruption is public knowledge and it is a shame, and because we know we are ashamed, but how to handle it? Nobody so far can give us a proper answer. The danger has long been known, but as yet government and society have shown no serious commitment.

If one encounters difficulties with some form of administration, just spend few more rupiah. All will run smoothly.

During the New Order under Soeharto's smiling military rule, the word corruption — along with democracy, succession, criticism, opposition, and other dangerous words — was taboo.

Those who dared to utter it in public faced the government's wrath. From Sri Bintang Pamungkas (who was forever being watched and jailed by the government) to Amien Rais (who was lucky to come on to the political stage at the right time and place, as Soeharto failed to silence him), corruption was unmentionable in public, but now the taboo has gone.

When asked not to touch something dangerous, a child's curiosity increases, and eventually the child touches it. Pamungkas and Amien, with other intellectuals and students, touched the subject of corruption. In the words of Amien, "Rid the government of KKN (corruption, collusion, and nepotism)."

Sadly the phrase KKN is worthless in the reformation era. Corrupt practices and issues turned out to be a much more

complicated business; we still do not have successful enforcement of justice and law.

However, the people of the post-reformation era, unlike during Soeharto's time, are brave in speaking out. They have no fear of being arrested by the government. The media covers corruption on a daily basis. What else should we talk about?

On the other hand, the meaning of the term corruption has been twisted in the public mind. Corruption has already become a joke.

To explain this, there is an anecdote. During Soeharto's era, the corrupt politicians or bureaucrats made their transactions under the table — they did not want the public to see what they were doing.

Shortly after the reformation movement, the corruptors negotiated deals on the table — meaning they had no need to hide their corruption. Long after reformation, they compete against each other to take everything including the table. Nothing is left.

The cases of Gayus H. Tambunan, crocodile versus gecko, Melinda Dee, the murder of Nasruddin and other cases, the saga of former Democratic Party treasurer Muhammad Nazaruddin, sparked abundant jokes and anecdotes. People were curious to follow the news related to Nazaruddin just for fun.

Just as Gayus wearing a funny wig worn during his excursion from jail to watch a tennis tournament in Bali drew our attention, so Nazaruddin's bizarre hat during a TV interview also became a hot issue. What kind of hat was it? What was the song which played as the soundtrack of the interview?

The trillions of rupiah involving Gayus, Melinda Dee and Nazaruddin also caught the media's attention. TVs, radios, and newspapers covered the huge amounts of money nonstop. The audiences could imagine those huge sums of money in their hands. What would you do with money like that?

Indeed, Gayus, Melinda and Nazaruddin's lifestyles made good entertainment.

How many luxurious cars did Melinda purchase? How many times did Melinda have plastic surgery? How much money did Gayus spend to go to Singapore and Bali? How many fake companies did Nazaruddin set up? Do you know how much the private plane

which brought Nazaruddin back home from Columbia cost?

These three are young and rich. No matter how they achieved it, money flowed instantly in their hands and now they are famous.

Do you want to know more about them? So do I.***

Beware of gruesome end of a dictator, corruptor

Singapore, October 25, 2011

Libya's paramount leader Muammar Qaddafi has paid the ultimate price for his long iron fist of unbearable dictatorship. His death on Thursday was truly ugly — a lesson worthy of reflection for the remaining dictators who have wantonly spilled the blood of their peoples.

I advise you not to watch the Al Jazeera's video recording of the incident on YouTube. It is horrible. Qaddafi, who onced ruled Libya with mighty arrogance, is beaten severely, after being pulled from a drainage pipe.

The Arab Spring has now dethroned three Middle Eastern dictators — Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Qaddafi. Ben Ali escaped from his own people's justice, whereas Mubarak resigned after a storm of mass demonstration.

Qaddafi, who acted like God, was killed in the same cruel manner that he used to rule his own people. Worries are certainly overshadowing Yemen, Syria, Saudi and, perhaps, Iran, where calls for freedom are mounting.

A tide of revolution is on the move. The wind of democracy will blow over the Middle East, but when it will happen nobody

knows. Indonesians, after more than a decade of reform that put an end to 32 years of Soeharto's rule, are still traveling the bumpy road toward democracy. Libyans should perhaps know what is ahead.

In the eyes of Qaddafi, Ben Ali is perhaps a coward, daring not to face the wrath of his own people. Instead, he left Tunisia and sought asylum in Saudi Arabia. He was sentenced in absentia to 35 years in prison.

That was not what Qaddafi wanted to show to the world. He was a colonel who stood with his overconfidence until the last breath. Political and moral pressure from all over the world did not deter his egoism. Qaddafi did not want to look like a coward. He stretched his muscle until his tragic end in a dirty pipe.

Compared to Qaddafi, Mubarak looks gentle. Mubarak knows the limit when his people's hate can no longer bear his presence. Tahrir Square witnessed that people power was mightier than Mubarak's dictatorship.

Indonesians have had two authoritarian presidents, Sukarno and Soeharto, neither of whom was comparable to Qaddafi. Qaddafi, as described by American commentator Fareed Zakaria, created a one-man cult. He destroyed the social and political system in Libya, leaving him to manipulate the country's affairs. Everything was centered around this one man. Qaddafi wanted to be worshipped.

Notwithstanding his one-man show style, Sukarno still left room for cooperation. His bitter end did not wash away everything he had built. Indonesians mourned his death. In fact, the cult of Sukarno is still alive until today. His name, and charisma, still echoes. Some political parties can still hang his picture to attract voters.

Soeharto's greed, with his cronies and family, ruined the system he himself had established. However, Soeharto resigned at the edge of people's patience. Many, who owed Soeharto their life, career and wealth, protected him against any possible trial. Unlike Mubarak, Soeharto escaped court.

True, Indonesia has no particular leader comparable to Qaddafi in terms of arrogance. But we have many "Qaddafis" in terms of manipulation. Various corruption cases have engulfed both local and central governments. What is more, Indonesian politicians

and bureaucrats have embezzled the state's and public's wealth. The country's corruption perception index has not improved significantly despite the "jihad" against graft waged at the beginning of the reform movement more than 13 years ago.

While most people are suffering economically, few have enjoyed the stolen luxuries. When the people's wrath reaches a climax, as what is happening in the Middle East, it will not be inconceivable for the corrupt leaders to follow in the footsteps of Qaddafi.***

Honorary degree neglects people's suffering

Jakarta, September 10, 2011

Theoretically not only should a university be a place of study and research, it should also be a place where knowledge and theory are examined as to whether they match what is really happening in society.

On one hand, a university should connect with reality, responding to political, social and economic demands. In this vein, a university, whose expensive administration is paid for through taxpayer money, should contribute to the needs of people.

On the other hand, a university — like an ancient monastery, *ashram* or other kinds of secluded places for hermits and ascetics — should be an "ivory tower", immune from short-term political and social maneuvers.

This description is of an ideal university, where research among intellectuals and service to the people go hand in hand. The university is a modern monastery and intellectuals who live there are modern priests and monks, as Roland Barthes, a French post-modernist literary critic, put it.

However, in today's Indonesia, politics — rather than knowledge or wisdom — is the driving force. Political considerations

are often put ahead of everything else.

Sadly, the quest for knowledge receives too little attention. Bureaucrats and politicians are honored much more than scientists, scholars or intellectuals, who often want to become politicians when the opportunities arise.

Campuses in Indonesia illustrate this situation. The election of rectors, deans and heads of departments are engulfed by political maneuvering and intrigue. No wonder that politics has a higher place on campus than knowledge and research.

Worse still, universities in this country have produced a huge number of plagiarists. Plagiarism can easily be spotted in students' final papers, theses and dissertations. Like it or not, university professors also set an appalling example.

Additionally, the ranking system for lecturers and professors, set up by the National Education Ministry, is based on administrative procedure rather than research leading to discoveries and inventions.

It is therefore difficult for many Indonesian scholars and researchers working abroad with international reputations to integrate themselves into the education system in Indonesia. Unsurprisingly, they are reluctant to return home.

It is no secret that those who receive professorships are not those who present new theories and findings, but those who fulfill administrative requirements. Bureaucracy — instead of research or invention — serves as both the standard and measurement in campuses. This is why it is hard for Indonesian universities to catch up with other leading international universities.

Keeping the above context in mind, UI (The University of Indonesia) courted King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, by awarding him an honorary doctorate.

To summarize the criticism and objections raised by scores of human right activists and intellectuals, from inside UI and outside the UI, there is no acceptable fundamental logic behind the award.

Both academically and morally, the procedure is defective. Political reasons, on which many other decisions are often based, were perhaps the answer. Like the awards granted to Abdullah Gul and Hasanal Bolkiah, the award to King Abdullah is perhaps aimed

at pursuing political — perhaps also financial — benefits.

The arguments behind the award and the objections perhaps can easily be juxtaposed as follows:

The king is considered to have modernized Islamic education, by for example allowing men and women to attend university. In fact, all modern democratic countries — including Muslim countries, such as Indonesia, Turkey, and Malaysia — have embraced the principle of gender equality, allowing men and women to pursue education equally and to communicate with each other. Note that women cannot drive freely in Saudi.

The king is considered to have advanced technology and science by promoting renewable technology. In fact, Saudi Arabia is a rich country, having no financial difficulties in supporting such a program. Many European countries have also taken this step.

The king is considered to have supported inter-religious dialogue and promoted moderate Islam. Note that no place of worship other than mosques is permitted in both Mecca and Medina. The king is considered to have supported peace in Middle East, such as mutual dialogue between Israel and Palestine. This is likely the only sound premise.

One more question can perhaps be raised; can the issue of human rights, including abuses against Indonesian migrant workers, be taken into account? Is this a nonacademic issue?***

The nation's ambivalent attitude toward sex

Yogyakarta, June 23, 2010

From the incident of the leaking sexual video tape of allegedly involving Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan, an Indonesian version of the Tiger Wood's scandal, one may conclude that we Indonesians are ambivalent about sex. We have a contradictory attitude toward sex in our public and private life.

Privately, sexual matters are subjects of relaxed and casual conversation. People can joke about it generously.

People are eager to share the file of the Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan sex tape. Indeed, the video is spread among friends freely.

It is only a file with no more than 8,000 kilobytes, which can be sent via email or copied with flash disk stick. In a minute, a hundred of copies can be produced effortlessly.

People can talk about sex with neither burden nor barriers. Sexual matters are a beloved subject.

Before dealing with a real theme in a formal and informal meeting, sexual themes can serve as an icebreaker. When a serious topic is boring, jokes about sex are preferable.

Teachers in the classrooms insert sexual jokes when explaining

difficult subjects to sleepy students. Upon listening the jokes, they wake up. They enjoy the content and laugh. The teachers can then return to the real theme.

Whether you're in restaurants or tents on the banks of streets, vendors and buyers chat about sex. They joke about sex. Taxi drivers gossip with his passenger about sex. In a meeting among local parliament members, sex also becomes a fascinating subject. Once I heard that a member of local parliament asked his colleague how many wives he has. The colleague answered that he was polygamous, following the footstep of the chairman of his "Islamist" party who married two women.

We are addicted to sexual themes, which is ironically repressed by state authorities — be they an RT (a small neighborhood unit) chief, the village bureaucracy, ministers, the governor and parliamentary members.

At the public level, in which politicians want to control their clean image, sex looks taboo.

They want to impose a strict rule upon people. Yet it is uncertain whether they implement the same measure on themselves.

According to their vision, common people should be pious, religious and clean. Society should be guarded from dirty entertainment and games.

They are very concerned about the image of Indonesia. Sexual themes are given more attention than the eradication of corruption. This can be seen from their comments made when the video tape of Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan was watched by the world.

But, how many sexual scandals among national and local politicians during the reformation era are caught by the public? Mention them. We are ambivalent about sex. As seen on TV, religious leaders, politicians, police and public figures seem to condemn the video tape. It remains unclear whether they themselves enjoyed the tape.

Ironically, a commentator, who is often called a media or IT expert, explained the episode of the tape in particular detail, action by action, and picture by picture, leading people to pay even more detailed attention to the video. Apparently, the expert and the audience enjoyed the video.

Authorities are repressive in response to the video. Like

ostriches, they buried their heads and closed their eyes to avoid reality. In fact, the way in which sex is discussed has developed very far. Sex in private and public has progressed beyond their control.

Yet they tape and watch it among friends. Adults save the tape in their computers and flash disk sticks.

All love sex, sexual themes and want to see more sex films. If the police and authorities want to bring the case of Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan to the court, other cases will soon be revealed in public. Be ready to be flooded with sexual video tapes, whose actors can be artists, politicians and other public figures.

One may also wonder whether the authorities enjoyed the tape during investigation.

What is clear is that the spread of the Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan video has buried many other important issues in the republic, the selection of the KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission) leader, responses to the flotilla incident, the oil spill and the planned Muhammadiyah congress. All eyes and ears are on Luna Maya and Ariel Peterpan.***

To list just a few of the porn bill's major flaws...

Heidelberg, Montreal, October 16, 2008

Our honorable members of the House of Representatives seem to put "personal bravado" above long-term national interest in their intention to pass "the already softened version" of the anti-pornography bill -- and are undeterred by the mounting protests from numerous societal groups.

The legislators have made blatant mistakes in the deliberation of this bill. I just want to mention some of the major ones.

The first grave error rests on the perception built by those who defend the bill that the critics have not carefully read the draft. The truth is that the bill's draft has been circulating around many Indonesian mailing lists for a long time.

Have the honorable members of the House read any of the many high-quality op-ed pieces penned by our "pundits" and published by numerous Indonesian newspapers on the bill?.

Do they also carefully listen to what the protesters -- marching on the streets across many cities of Indonesia -- have demanded? If so, why did these members then held their own version of a public hearing? Don't they regard these voices as those of the public?

There are concerted efforts to silence the voices of these critics

by meeting only people who support the bill.

Moreover, the philosophy behind it is truly misleading, with regard to our commitment to democracy education in Indonesia. The proposed bill implies a form of old fashioned power control, which sounds very New Order-style. In other words, the government will keep the morality and ethics of the Indonesian people under surveillance.

True democracy should run to the contrary. It means the Indonesian people should keep their eyes on the government -- legislative, judicative, and executive -- with respect to their morality and work ethics. Thus, in a democratic country where the government performs its duties and responsibilities, people watch the government officials and grade their performance -- not the other way around, i.e., the government spying on the people.

There are legislators who said passing the bill would be a "Ramadan gift" to Indonesian Muslims.

Vice President Jusuf Kalla -- who already hinted he may run again as the running mate to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the next election -- said the anti-pornography bill is not religiously motivated. This is only half true. The other half is that not only is this bill "religiously motivated", but it is also "politically motivated" by using religion as a lethal weapon to threaten the public critics.

The arguments, contained in the anti-pornography bill, originally resonated with the aspiration of "Islamism" in Indonesian politics. Due to the resistance of the Indonesian public against this ideological trend, however, its elements have gradually been softened.

Indeed, Islamism is currently receiving less and less sympathy from many Indonesian Muslims. The public, in this vein, exactly knows how this kind of ideology has sneaked around to find a place in Indonesian politics.

Another major flaw of the bill lies in the title itself -- "anti-pornography bill". This fake subject seems to address some fake issues and fake morality. How much impact on our morality will this bill will make by banning porn images? If we are honest enough we are currently faced with much more serious and real issues, such as rape, domestic violence, migrant workers who are raped by their bosses and other sexual harassments -- themes which

the even “softened version” of the anti-pornography bill doesn’t even touch.

For example, if a certain sexual crime happened, the police -- holding the proposed “anti-pornography bill” -- would either arrest the one who posted the porn pictures on the Internet or blame the women who are then accused of showing their body in a sexual manner which could lead to their being raped. The perpetrator, in turn, would be arrested, after public pressure mounted. Of course this sounds ridiculous. Yet that is what the “anti-pornography bill” will lead us to.

Thus, if our honorable members of the House have any good will to revise the current proposed bill, they should fundamentally change its title. “Anti-sex under age bill”, “anti-sexual violence bill”, “anti-rape bill”, or “protecting the victims of sexual violence bill” are subjects which are much more relevant in today’s Indonesia than “anti-pornography bill”. The content of the bills should then follow the proposed titles. ***

CHAPTER FIVE
PATRIOTISM AND NATIONAL ISSUES

The nation's dignity

Yogyakarta, October 26, 2010

Each epoch has its own spirit to define what "dignity" is. Throughout the history of this nation, the term renders many meanings.

Our first president Sukarno, one of those who laid the foundations of this country and incited the people's spirit to love this nation and have more self-confidence, had good taste and therefore set a high standard for the nation's self-esteem. For Sukarno, no matter how much it costs and what should be at stake, the nation's honor and pride are the prime priority.

Sukarno's fame rests in his brave (sometimes without forethought) decisions such as pulling Indonesia out of the United Nations in 1962. Various powerful slogans — such as anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, anti-neo-colonialism and "go to hell with your aid" — added flavor to his many burning speeches.

Sukarno's emotional campaign "crush Malaysia" clearly showed how thick his rhetoric of anti-imperialism was.

Just imagine, what Sukarno would do, when facing today's Indonesia-Malaysia tricky relation in regard to the border disputes and issues related to Indonesian migrant workers. Imagine how harshly he would condemn the neighbor and how ruthlessly he would deliver his speech.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono seems to be president at the right time. His wisdom is shown in that he did not incite the people's hostility toward Malaysia. Instead, he cooled the tension down.

He tried as much as possible to call upon people to use reason and consider that Malaysia is Indonesia's close neighbor.

Many interests are sacrificed, when the crisis is not handled prudently. That is what he sought to convey in his TV appearance.

Returning to the nation's dignity, for Soeharto, whose proposed hero status sparked controversy due to his three decades authoritarian regime,economy is a vital aspect to solve all nation's problems, which Sukarno previously failed to fulfill. Put dignity in the second row and people's stomachs should be the main concern.

When you are rich, your neighbor will never look down upon you. When you are wealthy, you will never serve as a domestic worker. When your wallet in your pocket is full of money, you will walk with dignity. When your country is prosperous, the main export is no longer domestic migrant workers.

There was a stark contrast between Soeharto and Sukarno with regard to dignity. Faced with hungry people, Sukarno would deliver a powerful speech convincing them that they were not hungry. Ironically, for two decades, people swallowed it. Soeharto, on the other hand, would borrow money from somewhere else to buy food in order to feed them. After that, however, the "smiling general" would say, "whatever I am doing to you, please shut up".

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono seems to agree with Soeharto. Economy is the main factor to increase the nation's dignity. During his campaign for the second term, he boasted that his first term was successful, as the unemployment fi gure in this country decreased.

Look at the price of fuel, which is decreasing. Look at the people's faces, which are happier, for they eat well. You may disagree, as this is a free country. Conduct a survey and reveal it to the public.

True, SBY is an accomplished politician in building and maintaining his "good image" in the public eye. However, until this second term the nation's dignity is not clearly defined.

At least, many commentators disagree with Susilo Bambang

Yudhoyono's steps, arguing that the way in which SBY's administration handled our problems with Malaysia does not reflect what most Indonesians expect. A question is therefore raised, "Where is our dignity?"

The same rings true with regard to the way SBY canceled his trip to the Netherlands.

Compare with Sukarno, during his trial in the Dutch court, in which he bravely condemned imperialism, colonialism and unjust deeds in front of the colonial government.

Whether Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono should run away from the Dutch court or face it, mirrors the way dignity is defined.

But anyway, we are still defining what this nation's dignity is.***

Fatherland: Soil and Water

Singapore, August 16, 2012

During the heyday of the revolution for the nation's independence in the early 20th century, soil or land dominated the subject of intellectual debates. Water, which surrounded the islands in the archipelago, earned fewer spotlights.

True, the Indonesian anthem composed by respected Ahmadiyah follower, Wage Rudolf Supratman, contains the combination of two words "*tanah air*/soil and water".

However, not only the anthem puts soil in the first place, it also emphasizes the role of land rather than water, such as in the phrase "*tanah tumpah darahku*/the soil in which my blood is shed." In short, water, which covers most of the nation's territory, has long received less attention.

Likewise, in pumping the spirit of the freedom fighters in the guerrilla wars against the two times Dutch aggressions, our national leaders, such as Gen. Soedirman and Soetomo, also pointed out land, or soil, symbolizing the fatherland, such as in the sentence "*sejengkal tanah tak rela kuberikan pada penjajah*/ a mere inch of soil I will never let the colonial aggressor take."

From elementary school, history teachers told us that the

syncretic Hindu-Budhist Majapahit kingdom in East Java with its mighty army under the leadership of prime minister Gajah Mada conquered many other kingdoms in islands far away from Java. It is not hard to imagine that without an adept naval force it would have been impossible for Majapahit to fulfill the phenomenal *palapa* oath, by which the vision to unite the hundreds of islands in the archipelago was possible. However, most of us miss the ocean adventure of Gajah Mada's legendary conquest.

Popular culture up to the 1990s, and perhaps until now, still mirrors the way in which history teachers instruct the subject. It is worth recalling that around the 1980s and the 1990s — unlike the later 2000s which were dominated by TV culture — radio drama became the people's entertainment in spending their leisure time.

Most of the people were entertained by adventurous knights (*pendekar*) in the old kingdoms. Many dramas depicted Gajah Mada as a mighty warrior with an uncontestable mastery in fighting on land.

To illustrate the point, in the 1990s the popular radio drama, *Tutur Tinular* (oral tradition) by S. Tijab — which was later presented on the wide screen and in a TV series — described the mighty Gajah Mada with his skillful martial arts and invulnerability in the face of any weapons, ranging from swords, archers, lances, to daggers.

The current popular four volume novels about Gajah Mada by Langit Krisna Hariyadi also described the Majapahit's prime minister with same the story and emphasis.

Nevertheless, during the New Order period, Soeharto imposed upon all students the responsibility of learning the dogmatic *Wawasan Nusantara* (the archipelagic insights) which touched upon the important role of the ocean in overseeing the archipelago. According to the wawasan, the sea does not disconnect seven hundred islands from each other, but serves as the "connector" uniting them. The sea is an integral part of the nation's territory. Indonesians should not fear waves and tides in the ocean. Nor should they avoid them. This is in theory.

In practice, history testifies a different account. As an army general of land forces, Soeharto gave his legion various privileges, compared to the few personnel of the naval force in the

government.

Various army generals held important ministerial and strategic positions. Only a few marshals had equal opportunity. The Javanese agricultural tradition also played a role in the political landscape and national culture. Compare this with the fishermen's traditions which have had little impact upon us.

From Soeharto's period onwards, the mighty maritime Buddhist kingdom of Sriwijaya has even now still received insufficient attention. In fact, through its naval force, this kingdom's religious network and diplomatic relations went far beyond Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the northern part of the capital city of Jakarta is surrounded by sea. However, beaches and sea shores never become potential scenery adding beauty to the city. Dirty rivers filled with garbage and human waste exacerbates the city's ugly face. Rotten stench and hot temperatures have become the distinctive character of north Jakarta.

Indeed, both local and central governments have never successfully treated and managed or our waters. In fact, the capital city's population is always haunted by wrathful water during the wet season.

Floods have always dominated newspapers' and TV's headlines during the rainy season.

During the current Jakarta gubernatorial campaigns, we heard only little, if ever, Jokowi-Ahok (Joko Widodo and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) or Foke-Nara (Fauzi Bowo and Nachrowi Ramli) talking about water in the sea and rivers.

Nor are we told about the way in which these candidates will handle ports, beaches, and fishing. Worse, sensitive issues around religion and ethnicity have made politics dirtier — a crescendo song sung by legendary dangdut singer Rhoma Irama.

Water in the ocean, rivers, lakes and ponds remain obstacles for Indonesians to defend the national unity. We need to learn more about and love our sea, which is indeed far larger than our soil.***

Time to reclaim the spirit of Indonesian nationalism

Heidelberg, August 15, 2008

During the heyday of awakening Indonesian nationalism leading to the birth of this nation, there were many stories about making compromises. Most of our founding fathers have, in this regard, set excellent examples.

In the process of establishing the foundation upon which this nation was built, they did not compel others to accept a certain ideology. They instead compromised among their many differences.

Those who regarded nationalism as the basic principle in their movement listened to their counterparts -- socialists, religious leaders and communists -- and vice versa. In many meetings and discussions, they always tried to accommodate differing ideologies.

This becomes apparent when we learn what happened during BPUPKI meetings. This Japanese-organized committee for granting independence to Indonesia, which later became the Committee for Indonesian Independence, held meetings in which prominent figures -- such as Muhammad Yamin, Sukarno and Supomo -- formulated the basic principles of Indonesian nationhood. As the

story goes, until Indonesia's independence was achieved, a secular state remained the best choice, which most of our leaders agreed with.

The exhausting debate about Islam and the state is an old story as a lengthy polemic between Sukarno and Mohammad Natsir, detailed by the late Deliar Noer, has shown. The dispute over these issues has, however, been resolved, thus current Indonesian generations should not repeat the same issues and stories with the same approaches and styles.

Our past leaders chose that this republic be neither theocracy nor caliphate, a legacy we should guard. It is not an exaggeration to say those who dream of founding a theocracy or caliphate in Indonesia are those who ignore history and are reluctant to learn from it.

Ironically, many debates held recently by Indonesian Islamists -- whether on behalf of Islamist political parties or nonpolitical organizations, such as HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia), the MMI (Indonesian Mujahidin Council) and the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) -- contained no new arguments compared with those of Natsir.

Religions, as the history of Indonesia has taught us, should not contradict the spirit of nationalism and humanity. In his famous piece, Sukarno called on Indonesians to embrace an eclectic ideology consisting of religion, Marxism and nationalism. Indeed, Marxism and socialism in the nascent history of Indonesia can be seen in many views adopted by some Indonesian leaders, such as HOS Tjokroaminoto and Tan Malaka.

Some elements of Marxism, entailing criticism of religion and religious beliefs, were found often enough in many writings penned by early Indonesian nationalists. The fully demonized version of Marxism, and particularly communism, occurred only after the tragedy of 1965, a known upheaval which involved homicides of innumerable Indonesian citizens.

Many of our leaders, such as Agus Salim, Wachid Hasyim and A.A. Maramis, were religious themselves and did not intend to destroy religions. Rather than contradicting religions and the contemporary values of nationalism and humanity, they sought compromise. In avoiding egoism, by stressing their identity as Muslims, Christians or followers of other religions, they

wholeheartedly supported this nonreligious state.

Thus there is no Islam in Indonesia other than Indonesian Islam. Neither is there any Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism or any other belief which is beyond "Indonesian-ness". This critical element of Indonesian-ness has bound together all people in the country with various ethnicities, faiths and origins.

A few recent groups, who display their egoism by stressing their religious identity, deny the lessons drawn from Indonesia's history. Primordialism -- a group sentiment based on a single ethnicity and religion which has been codified in local ordinances under the aegis of sharia -- is never justified.

Not only have proponents of this idea gone against Indonesia's founding fathers, they have also threatened the foundation which those leaders laid down. These proponents have forgotten the above compromises. They instead try to impose a single identity upon a diverse people.

An antidote to this new wave of Islamism is recalling our own traditions: the blend of religion and nationalism which has taken root in our soil. Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah could perhaps serve as remedies as these two organizations have demonstrated experience in nurturing Indonesian Islam.

Some leaders of these two groups, such as Hasyim Muzadi and Din Syamsuddin, have often condemned violence resulting from Islamism, which could endanger the unity of Indonesia, notably during two recent international conferences on religious peace held in Jakarta. We can only hope statements delivered by such religious and political leaders are not merely rhetorical.

Inasmuch as history never repeats itself, recent challenges cannot be equated with past ones. Yet some lessons can be learned. While previous leaders blended values from nationalism, Marxism, humanism and religious beliefs, we are now facing different challenges which demand new solutions.

Far more complex issues -- everyday economic challenges, local and global politics, regional issues in Southeast Asia, global competition -- are now confronting us. A new formulation of nationalism is called for, an effort in which today's Indonesian intellectuals should engage. ***

Independence Day and the imagined enemies

Yogyakarta, August 16, 2010

Every year, on the 17th of August, our history is glorified. We pay tribute to the national heroes who fought against "foreign enemies" for independence.

In various ceremonies, the speakers — be they the president, governors, heads of districts, sub-districts, villages, or school principals — remind us that Indonesian independence was paid for by the flesh, blood, and bones of our grandfathers and grandmothers who fought in bloody battles and wars. Some died, others survived.

Legs were amputated, hands were lost, villages destroyed and rice fields burned. We have inherited their sacrifice. Due to their courage and bravery, we can breathe this air.

Romo Mangunwijaya, a religious leader and prominent intellectual, said that many battles between the Dutch and Indonesians in the post-proclamation period could be described as "cat-and-mouse" skirmishes rather than real battles, as the sharpened bamboo sticks used as weapons by Indonesians were incomparable with the guns and rifles in the hands of trained Dutch soldiers. The Indonesian insurgents too busy finding safe places to hide from the

Dutch to face their ostensible enemy.

In the 1950s and 1960s at various speeches at national ceremonies, former president Sukarno — with his thunderous voice, stylish grey suit, elegant sunglasses and magnetic oratorial style — always said that the climax of our struggle was the 17th of August, which he had many names for — the milestone of Indonesian history, the climax of the Indonesians' struggle, the sacred day, the blessed day and so on.

For Sukarno and his generation, colonialism and imperialism were real. The old generation often belittles our difficulties, which, for them, are far not comparable to their suffering, to their imprisonment and battles. They often say: "Nowadays children are spoiled with high-tech gadgets and junk foods. There are no serious challenges in their lives."

For them, independence meant that this country was free from any alien enemies, e.g. the Dutch, Japanese or other foreign powers. These enemies never gave up in their fight to conquer this piece of paradise where coconut trees grow tall, paddy trees bear yellow fat rice seeds, and spices can be harvested easily. So ladies and gentlemen, be prepared to raise your weapons whenever the enemies intend to march upon our land and water.

During the 30 years of Soeharto's regime, the story of heroic struggle remained. The echoes of wars and rumors of war were embedded in the visions of the army generals who dominated the political landscape at the time.

Soeharto was also proud of his achievement in building the economy of this nation. He once boasted that despite his background as a village boy who was raised in paddy fields, he shouldered the responsibility of filling the mouths of more than 130 million Indonesians.

In the reform era, and in the context of current globalization, to give meaning to Indonesian independence as a nation free from foreign influence is misleading.

It is indeed impossible to be an independent nation, as far as Sukarno, and often Soeharto, understood the issue. We cannot avoid all foreign contact, which can perhaps be interpreted as influence, intervention, subjugation or economic imperialism.

Keep in mind that we buy cars from Europe and Japan that use

Singaporean spare parts. Korean electronic gadgets are commonly used here. Chinese toys are always affordable for our kids.

Simultaneously, Indonesians export garments, rubber, oil and marine and agricultural products. Bear in mind that Indonesian laborers are also migrating to neighboring countries.

In short, we now live in an era, in which increased cooperation, exchange and openness among many nations are inevitable.

Look at the Europeans who have eliminated economic borders in the EU. More Asians are building careers in America.

Egoistic nationalism, with the dignity of self-sufficiency, is no longer tenable, nor is to keep the purity of our "Indonesianness."

However, misleading interpretations of independence are still popular. Our enemies are foreign or alien powers, who never cease to deprive Indonesians of their wealth and resources.

History teaches us that more Indonesians were killed by other Indonesians than by the Dutch, Japanese or any other foreign power. Notwithstanding their enormous contribution to this country, many great names — Sutan Sjahrir, Tan Malaka, Munir, the victims of 1965 tragedy, of the 1974 Malari tragedy and of the 1998 Trisakti tragedy, to mention but a few — became martyrs, at the hands of fellow Indonesians (be they the government, the army, or civilians).

Kings hatched assassination plot against other kings. Politicians and their own fellows were locked in deadly wrestling matches.

What kind of independence are we seeking? From whom? From foreign enemies or local ones?

For Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who was arrested Monday after years of preaching a misguided and bigoted interpretation of religion, the United States and its allies are always haunting other nations.

A friend of mine once joked that if Ba'asyir's hens fail to lay eggs, he would surely blame the US. If the eggs do not hatch, perhaps due to the hot weather, he will blame the West. Everyone is his "imagined enemy".

For Tifatul Sembiring, the former president of the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) and currently the communications and information technology minister, Indonesian independence means that the Internet in Indonesia should be shielded from "unwanted"

content, such as pornography or other “dangerous” materials — but controversial content is an “imagined enemy”, which unfortunately defeated him.

As for you, you can decide which interpretation you prefer. The choices are unlimited.***

Indonesia is experiencing an identity crisis

Heidelberg, Apri 5, 2007

The recent support of the Indonesian government for United Natons Security Council Resolution 1743 on Iran's nuclear program has led to another public controversy. This, without any doubt, resembles to the public responses to the short visit of United States President George W. Bush here last year.

More importantly, those events have raised confusion about our national identity. To be clear, we can perhaps break down the question into the following: Are we Muslims or Indonesians? Can we maintain our unique nature as Muslims and Indonesians at the same time? Then, questions that are more straightforward may appear: What kind of intention do we have in mind now, to build a secular modern state or an Islamist sharia-based state? Are we somewhere in the stages of turning from the former to the latter? If so, we are now simply ignoring our founding fathers' commitment to respect for diversity through their fight against attempts to insert the word sharia in the state ideology.

It looks difficult then to describe our own collective identity as a nation with confidence. What is certain is the unlucky position of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. During his administration the

process of radicalization has gained momentum, which seems to overshadow the process of democratization.

Given the situation, the government has to manage as wisely as possible the use of religious sentiment in the political realm. In doing so, the Yudhoyono administration has so far failed to show any consistency, unfortunately.

On one hand, Yudhoyono displays no clear response to the enactment of over 50 sharia-based regional ordinances across the country. Former president Abdurrachman Wahid once commented cynically on this attitude that, like many other public figures, Yudhoyono seems to be afraid of being labeled as anti-Islam or Islamo-phobic.

Naive as it may sound, Yudhoyono has even tried to present his own image and to defend his administration against any possible blame for failure to address problems by exploiting religious sentiment. This was evident at least in the zikir nasional (national repentance) held in the Istiqlal mosque together with his Cabinet members and top state officials recently. This feature reflects Yudhoyono's own belief that he himself needs religious legitimacy to defend his position.

On the other hand, the recent support for the United Nations Resolution contains certain courage. This was as bold as Yudhoyono's acceptance of Bush. In both cases, numerous opinions written in the national media attacked the government's policy and, to be sure, the masses took to streets and yelled their anti-Western attitude, based mainly on their religious emotions.

It is very likely that in both cases the government had already anticipated the harsh public reception. The public seem to think that anything related to the United States and the West ought to be rejected and is automatically against the Muslim interests. Of course, this attitude is based upon incorrect theological rather than political considerations. To them, Iran is simply a Muslim country and its people are their brothers, so much so that it is not important anymore to understand what the case really is.

By contrast, the Indonesian government's support for the resolution is clearly in line with the interests of the United States To put the point differently, the United States has been often perceived as the mastermind of troubles plaguing in the world and even in the country. As for Yudhoyono, however, the show must go on.

In the Iran sanction case, the opposition bloc at the House is directly targeting Yudhoyono through their interpellation petition. For those who do not like Yudhoyono, it seems the time has come to stir up the emotion of the people, regardless of the possibility that they may not understand the matter at hand.

It suffices to tell us, given the fact that our identity of being unique Indonesian Muslims has gone, it leaves us nothing but to stick to our Muslim identity and will lead to fantaticisim. Accordingly, it would be hard now, if not impossible, to address the public with the real issues, such as the content of the resolution and the reasons why we are supporting it. Not to mention how the current international situation and the long complicated conflict of so many interests in the Middle East could be better understood.

Politicians who signed the petition have seized the momentum to achieve certain goals. Whether or not the interpellation petition may work or not, at least they have exercised religious sentiment in their political rhetoric.

One may suggest that Yudhoyono counter the attack using the same religious sentiment, such as by holding a bigger mass prayer. But resorting to religious conviction for political gains will only exacerbate our crisis of identity, I'm afraid.***

The tale of an ungrateful nation called Indonesia

Jakarta, February 09, 2011

The recent assault on Ahmadiyah followers, for whatever reason, shows that this society has no gratitude towards the minority religious group that, together with other religious and ethnic groups, contributed to the building of this nation. Please keep in mind that a "healthy society" should respect all the elements that have collectively formed and sustained the existence of this country.

As understood in social sciences and proven by history, a society is created by diverse elements that are connected to each other.

Like a glass, society is a system with a vulnerable structure, easily broken. Like a net, all elements collectively sustain the whole. If one thread is damaged, the whole system is in peril.

Some members of Ahmadiyah, three of whom were killed, were stabbed. Their wounds are felt by all Indonesians.

The nation is mourning the victims. The grief is now engraved on Indonesia's history and will continue indefinitely. The failures and the successes in appreciating the existence and role of certain groups, ethnicities, religions, sects or any other kinds of groups within this society will determine the longevity of this nation.

If minority religious groups such as Ahmadiyah, a Christian sect or the Lia Eden community are repeatedly harassed, whereas other groups whose belief and faith are considered in line with those of the majority are protected, there is no guarantee that we ourselves will not be considered deviants who, sooner or later, will be persecuted.

Protecting a vulnerable group means protecting ourselves. Any persecution on the grounds of faith, ethnicity, religion or race must thus be stopped.

The recent attack on an Ahmadiyah group in Banten must be condemned. Blame should not be directed merely at those who specifically executed the attack, i.e. hardliners motivated by their "own truth claims" or provocateurs who fired up the emotions of villagers.

The local authority and the central government are together responsible for failing to protecting their own citizens.

For sure, the Indonesian judicial system begs revision. Blasphemy laws should be revised. As often reported, those who commit atrocities hide under the law.

Therefore, it is an urgent call that protection of all religions and beliefs embraced by all citizens should be enshrined in the law.

Then the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) would no longer have any room to support crimes committed by those who hold power. The MUI never dares to side with the powerless.

The current government should show a more serious commitment to guard the diversity of this archipelagic country or else history will record their failure.

Historically speaking, different religions have emerged from the same tradition. The semitic religious tradition served as a background against which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were born.

The same religion gave birth to different sects. From the seventh century — when Islam emerged — to the present, countless sects came and went. Ahmadiyah is only one of them.

Those who argue that Ahmadiyah's main teachings are un-Islamic and therefore the sect has no right to exist in this country are entirely misguided.

This claim has neither historical nor theological justification. Nor does this "dangerous" belief fit with a modern pluralistic society.

This claim is likely motivated by short-term political interest. Those who hold this belief want to appear in the public as the most "Islamic figure" with "pure" Islamic beliefs. In this country, religious piety has become a political commodity.

This land should be proud to be a place where various religions thrive. Freedom of religion should prevail. Persecution and oppression must be condemned. The criminals must be punished.

Historical records testify that Ahmadiyah had existed in this archipelago before the independence of this nation.

India, the place where the Islamic sect was born, has close relations with Indonesia both culturally and religiously.

Hindu and Buddhist traditions developed in Sumatra, Kalimantan and Java. The many extant temples and shrines attest to this.

In the beginning, Islam in Indonesia did not come directly from Middle Eastern countries. Trade routes took Muslim traders bearing goods, and the seeds of Islamic tradition, through Gujarat and on to Indonesia.

That is how Indonesian Islam originated. Thus, Indian traders played a vital role. Arriving in Indonesia, Islam then blended with many local beliefs and faiths — a recipe that cannot be found in other Muslim countries.

Ahmadiyah is perhaps the last import from India. It cannot be eradicated, nor can its traces be wiped out.

Ahmadiyah, like any other beliefs and traditions from India that have mingled with Indonesian indigenous practices, should receive equal appreciation and treatment.

In the early 20th century, works by Ahmadi scholars introduced Indonesian intellectuals to progressive thinking. Many Indonesian leaders, such as HOS Tjokroaminoto and Sukarno, read the Koran that was translated into English by an Ahmadi scholar Mawlana Muhammad Ali.

Likewise, they were familiar with the works of Mushir Hosain Kidwai.

It is interesting that Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, who played a great role in awakening the awareness of nationalism in this country, did not depend entirely on Arabic tradition.

However, they often studied Islam via sources written in Dutch or English, some of which were penned by Ahmadi scholars.

Unsurprisingly, our first president Sukarno showed gratitude to and warmly welcomed the contribution of Ahmadiyah to the new country.

Equally, Mukti Ali, the minister of religious affairs known for his initiative and effort in the field of interreligious dialogue, appreciated the role of the Islamic sect in the Muslim intellectual world.

Amien Rais, the former chair of the MPR (People's Consultative Assembly), never fails to mention this fact.

For sure, we owe a lot of thanks to this minority group in many respects. Ahmadiyah's contribution to this country is priceless.

But, we are not sure how we can pay this back. Only ungrateful people who are ignorant of history can harm, not to mention to kill, their fellow citizens. Will the government and those in authority put an end to this?***

The death of reason, the destruction of nation

Heidelberg, Montreal, June 7, 2008

The condemnation coming from across Indonesia, and the world, for the bamboo-stick ambush by the FPI (Islam Defenders Front) on a peaceful rally by the National Alliance for the Freedom of Faith and Religion at the Monas (National Monument) is not enough.

The following real steps must be taken immediately: ban the FPI officially; arrest all of those involved in the attack, including those who were responsible for planning the action and those who executed it; and more importantly clean Indonesia from any mode of radical thinking.

As long as the government of Indonesia has the good will to do so, these two steps are easy, as anyone who loves reasoning would be happy to see it happen. However, the last task needs commitment and patience, and is a long-term task consisting of educating Indonesian society.

The actions of radical perpetrators can be seen clearly, whereas radical thinking often remains ignored by Indonesian society. Yet the actions result from thinking. Thus, banning the FPI is only cutting off one of numerous branches, while the tree still stands

firmly in its roots and grows.

Radical thinking is like a deadly virus. Once it spreads in a body, what a doctor needs is to amputate any parts in which the virus resides. Indeed, it is too late to treat these parts leniently. We are at the curative stage now, not preventive. Yet prevention is still necessary to guard the rest of the body from the spreading virus.

The mode of radical thinking is contagious. It is like a plague. Indonesian society must be well prepared to strengthen its immune system.

The symptoms of radical thinking can be seen clearly in many of those who have demanded the prohibition of people with different faiths and beliefs, such as Ahmadiyah, to have their basic right as human beings, namely to live peacefully in Indonesia.

Ironically, many of those who hold important positions in the government also suffer from this kind of disease. Another common symptom can be detected in those who reject any kind of reasoning.

A clear message can be drawn from the ambush in Monas, that only these radical groups have the right to speak, whereas others must be silent. To the radicals, truth and religion run in their blood and breathe, so much so that they feel innocent whenever they use violent means. Moreover, they regard others who use reason to protect themselves as wrongdoers.

It is not a good solution, nonetheless, to blame either Indonesian Muslim communities or Islam for providing these seeds of radicalism. It is true, however, that religious jargon often serves as a media to express their radical thinking: in the name of God, scripture and prophets.

Radicalism has to do with society as a whole and its leadership. Whenever the leadership in society is weak, radical groups try to steal it. Particularly, in the aftermath of the increase of fuel prices, the hope to live decently is also sinking. The current government is often seen to have failed with the economy. If the stomach is empty due to the soaring price of basic needs, people are easy to get mad. Against this backdrop, the seeds of radical thinking and action find fertile soil to grow.

Moreover, radicalism in Indonesia has grown rapidly due to the remaining failure of Indonesian society and the government to build

a true democratic and prosperous society. In turn, all Indonesians, regardless of their faith, ethnicity or cultural background, should shoulder the burden of this mistake for allowing radicalism to grow.

It should also be borne in mind that the victims whom radical groups have attacked are people with various religious backgrounds -- be they Muslim or non-Muslim. Radicalism, thus, should become a concern for all of us. It is therefore difficult to accept the statement made by the minister of religious affairs, Maftuh Basyuni, whose idea is to prevent non-Muslims from intervening in the case of Ahmadiyah.

It is clear that the idea of banning Ahmadiyah has little to do with theological discussion. Instead, it has more to do with the basic rights of being Indonesian: the right to live, to believe and to practice whatever faith they believe.

Moreover, this has become a concern of all people around the world, a concern to which the United Nations has already paid attention. Given this fact, the government has no choice between banning Ahmadiyah or the FPI and the likes. Who the government should ban is clear: the FPI, which has often violated basic human rights and has put Indonesia in danger.

Indonesia was founded by intellectual leaders who demonstrated fine reasoning in many debates against the Dutch colonial rulers, not by those who used mythical bamboo sticks in battle. Many victims of the Monas ambush are young intellectuals, the nation's best resources, who sought to inherit that reasoning in guarding this nation by commemorating the birth of state ideology Pancasila (the Five Principles), a ceremony that was designed to be full of reasoning and love in guarding the diversity of Indonesia. The FPI, on the other hand, who answered this with the bamboo stick, would bring this nation to nowhere but destruction.***

Enlightenment progress in Indonesia postponed

Heidelberg, Montreal, April 30, 2008

Day by day, I observe the Indonesian public realm with the loss of hope. I may exaggerate this mere feeling, since I'm still living abroad where I sometimes suffer from homesickness. However, when it comes to the matters related to religion, i.e., certain radical groups and their interpretation of religion, my anxiety is justified.

All Indonesian Muslims, according to their assumption, have already joined their league to make the mission of returning the current society to the supposed past orthodoxy.

When asked by a non-Indonesian friend here in Germany, I postulated a rather diplomatic answer, saying "these people are only minor in terms of number; I'm not worried at all. We Indonesians have many progressive thinkers. They are all committed to guarding our moderate character of Indonesian Islam".

However, this friend made me speechless, as he showed me news and articles on the government's inability to protect Ahmadiyah and how it is even close to banning the sect.

I used to assume that persecution of those who were branded heretics occurred only in history, such as in the age of antiquity or late antiquity. It is true that during the New Order, the government

silenced many who tried to express their disappointment with certain unjust situations.

However, physical attacks of certain religious groups seem to have never occurred. Ironically, when the nation is in the reform era, we become more intolerant of violent against others. The history of Indonesia retreats. The clock turns backward. Indeed, the dream of those who dream to return the present to the past has already come true.

The issue of sharia and fake religious piety has turned to political commodity. Local politicians have used this issue to attract potential voters. This contradicts the results of many polls conducted within last two years where many respondents are described as not being in favor of sharia. Whatever the reality is, we have to remain vigilant.

On the other hand, those who have acted on behalf of and have affiliated with secular political parties have often disappointed common people. These politicians have failed to show morality and integrity, and more and more Indonesians have highlighted their image of being corrupt. People then turn their attention to religion in politics, as secular politicians have not fulfilled what they promised. Let us give better chances to those who claim to be afraid of God, these people then assumed.

Nothing is wrong with being religious or pious. However, when anything -- be it politics, law, policy or intellectual thought -- is measured with certain distorted standards of orthodoxy that certain limited circles have enforced, a phrase belonging to Karl Marx that religion is opium to society seems to be true.

To illustrate this point, numerous people come to the street in trance, yelling, cursing others, blaming them for no reason, inciting people to hate others, burning things and destroying even mosques. Indeed, many religious speeches delivered in Indonesian language during religious sermons, posed in YouTube, confirm this.

A known public preacher cursed so many people, ranging from scholars to intellectuals. This clerk recalled the cowardice of many Indonesian political leaders -- i.e., many Indonesian presidents -- for not imposing the “true sharia” in Indonesia. Typically, hid audience applauded and yelled “God is great”. Indeed, those who watched this kind of episode would confirm the above saying of

Karl Marx that this kind of opium has made many drunk even without alcohol.

Historically speaking, the *reformasi* era has paved a new way for democracy in Indonesia which, in turn, brought about freedom of expression. However, many radical groups have hijacked this opportunity to mute that freedom of expression by bullying free intellectual thinking, banning those who embrace different faiths, showing tyranny, burying reasoning and finally removing democracy itself. This all can be seen in the content of personal blogs in the Internet, speeches, mass rallies and perhaps the basis of many local ordinances.

Whereas several politicians have followed the common trend that common people embraced in the hope that their pious appearance in public would increase their popularity, how about the elite Indonesian intellectuals? Do they still stand on the side of their commitment as an independent barometer?

What is clear is that Indonesian history has moved backward. ***

Indonesian patriotism: Recalling the middle path

Yogyakarta, August 15, 2011

From the heyday of the nationalist movement in the early 20th century to the reformation era, Indonesian patriotism has been built on the spirit of compromise by seeking the middle way among various stances. Our leaders were adept at keeping the balances between differences.

These leaders gave priority to wisdom and sound judgment. In many debates among them, nobody absolutely won. Nor was anybody totally defeated.

This is Indonesia, belonging to no particular group or person. All parties have contributed to building this nation.

All citizens have the same right to live and to believe. All people can freely choose parties or leaders as they like. So can they be chosen. This is a free country. Hard work, however, is needed to establish this principle.

The unclear relationship between state and religion in Indonesia often causes confusion. Many wonder whether Indonesia is a secular or religious state. On many occasions, intellectuals and pundits have rejected both categories.

Whereas Sukarno and Mohammad Natsir still differentiated the secular and religious state, later thinkers sought a compromise between the two terms.

The attempts can be seen in the works of Driyarkara, a prominent Indonesian philosopher, who underlines that Indonesia is neither a secular state (in which state and religious affairs are completely separated) nor a religious state (in which a certain religion dominates the law of the state).

Driyarkara explains that some ethics and norms in the Indonesian society are based on religious values. Religion is a vital element in Indonesian life. Religion cannot thus be simply discarded. Indonesian society and religion cannot be divorced. The relationship between state and religion, however, yields a different formula.

There are, of course, some ambiguities in the aspects where religion should play a role in the state and in what aspects religion should be kept away.

This conundrum has generated heated debates from the early twentieth century to the present day.

In fact, Indonesians are religious, no matter what faith the people embrace. Additionally, religion and politics are often interwoven.

In the wake of 1965 upheaval, the New Order government imposed upon citizens the necessity to embrace one of the official religions. On our ID cards our chosen religion is stated. Atheists have no right to live in this country. President Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), challenged this. The attempt, however, failed.

On the other hand, intellectuals are quite alert to the danger of the use and abuse of religion in the state system and public life.

Munawir Sjadzali, a minister of religious affairs under the New Order government, clearly stressed that Indonesia is not an Islamic state.

There is no reason to reject the consensus reached by previous leaders in the light of modern democracy and human rights.

It is true that the majority of Indonesians are Muslims. But Islam is not the sole factor that can glue all people together. Throughout history Islam was not the only aspect which united different ethnic groups living in various islands.

The Islamic kingdom Mataram, located in present Yogyakarta, failed to repeat what Hindu's Majapahit had achieved. So did other Islamic kingdoms, such as Pasai, Demak, Pajang, Bone, Tidore, Makassar and Kartasura. They never successfully controlled half of Majapahit's territory. Some even battled against each other.

Ironically, the Dutch rulers often served as the mediator to find peace among them, as lampooned in the novels by Mangunwijaya. Truces and treaties were signed before the might of the colonial government.

That Islam is the only solution to the current problems facing Indonesia is deceptive and illusory. What is true is that Islam, and being Muslim, is part of the dilemma that Indonesian intellectuals have been trying to find a solution to for a long time.

Indonesians have so far no intention to abandon this religion. Compromise between religious values and local tradition has been made. It is not easy for Indonesian Muslims to place their religion in the national context, particularly when the religion complicates their identity — given the fact that not all Indonesians are Muslims and not all "old Islamic doctrines" are relevant to the current Indonesian character.

Amid the New Order's ideological propaganda of "development", Mukti Ali, a key advocate of religious dialogue in Indonesia, coined the slogan of "spiritual and material development". In this regard, Ali saw that religion could play a role in the process of nation building. Religion should contribute its spiritual dimension to the advancement of Indonesian human resources. Spirituality and morality taught by religions are positive aspects that could perhaps add another ingredient of economic growth and scientific progress.

In this vein, Indonesia is different from Turkey, in which Mustafa Kemal Pasha Ataturk sought to implement Western principles of secularization. Nor is the case of Indonesia similar to those of Middle Eastern countries in which reformation is performed very late with regard to the current tide of democratization in the Arab Spring.

Indonesia, claimed by our pundits, is unique, different from other democratic countries in the East and the West. Our democracy is Pancasila's version, whose interpretation is always ambiguous and

changing from the Old Order to the reformation era.

It is therefore unsurprising that many Indonesians have a concept of a perfect man/woman in the person of Habibie, the third president, who is a scientist, bureaucrat, politician and yet religious. When asked about their dream, many Indonesian children in the 1980s and 1990s wanted to become a genius like they perceived Habibie to be. In reality, Habibie's political career, like Gus Dur's, was not free from controversies.

The middle path sought by our founding fathers and the later generation of intellectuals had to pass many bumpy roads. Some wanted to bend the system to the right direction, whereas others to the left.

Some saw that the middle path was boring and therefore wanted to turn the direction to the far left. They were thirsty for revolution. This endeavor ended in disaster. Communist revolution failed at least twice in the case of Madiun and in the 1965 upheaval. Along with the collapse of communist ideology in the world, and with the triumph of liberal democracy, we never hear of any signs of revivalism in this direction in Indonesia.

Others attempted to swing the pendulum to the far right. They believed that religion, particularly Islam, should take a greater part in state affairs and public life. Islamic radicalism was born. Conservatism seized the moment.

However, extremism in whatever forms and styles has failed in this country. In the name of Islam, Kartosuwiryo's rebellion against Sukarno was extinguished. Learning from the past, Soeharto gave not the slightest chance for religious extremism.

During Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration, radicalism did not gain the public's sympathy. Violence inflicted by radicals was cursed. Major religious groups stated their commitment that the Republic of Indonesia is the final consensus, which should be guarded until the last drop of blood. Any attempt to weaken the nation should be fought.

However, conservatism is disguised in various forms. The state showed a lenient attitude to radical groups, which often showed off power in the public. The principles of the middle path should be recalled.

Why were those who attacked and killed Ahmadiyah members sentenced to less than a year in jail? Why were the local ordinances with sharia content never revoked? Has the state ideology already swung to the right direction?***

Comparing Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Soeharto

Yogyakarta, June 10, 2011

A recent survey released by Indo Barometer said that Indonesians preferred Soeharto's "prosperous" and "stable" authoritarian rule to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's more "democratic" government.

Sukarno's presidency, which was marked by political turmoil and economic difficulties, ranked third.

The result of the survey mirrors the pragmatic attitude adopted by most Indonesians. In our minds, economy and security — a mantra that Soeharto used to mesmerize us for 32 years — were prime priorities.

No matter how much Soeharto, whose 90th anniversary was commemorated on Wednesday, silenced opposition and criticism, we were still fond of his policies on the affordable price of rice, inexpensive community health centers, family planning, decreasing illiteracy and an end to radicalism.

Yudhoyono's first term merited credit. In the midst of reform euphoria when many factions with different agendas emerged from silence, he reflected the Indonesian mood in general. He played a gambit to always seek the middle path.

From his first appearance until now, Yudhoyono has

represented neither civilians nor the military. The former soldier appears neither too stern nor too soft in people's eyes. He does not always wear a badge on his breast. But he has not abandoned all his military attributes.

In fact, Yudhoyono seemed to compromise with many groups and interests. This can still be felt even now.

His political luck was bolstered by demands for conciliation among many differing groups amid a rising democratic tide. He made his fortune and won a second term.

Compared to Soeharto, Yudhoyono is of course much more democratic. Given the spirit of openness that has become the ethical standard of leadership, anybody can criticize his policies. Pundits, artists and commentators can now freely convey their disappointment without being afraid of jail or torture. By democratic standards, our current president is anything but a complainer in the public.

It was impossible to breathe in such a democratic air during Soeharto's era. His control — like the control currently exercised by Middle Eastern dictators — was a nightmare for us.

As a university student, I, like most of my friends, felt that walls, streets, trees and even the sky seemed to be living beings that had ears and mouths to report any suspicious activities to the "mighty lord".

Nobody dared to whisper an opinion on any subject critical of the regime. Political conversations and discussions were conducted carefully. Freedom was a luxury.

The reform era has given us what we we craved during the New Order period. But "slow economic recovery" in the aftermath of the crisis failed to satisfy our needs and demands.

Yudhoyono's has not fulfilled all the promises he made while campaigning for a second term. We are not quite happy with him.

Soeharto often showed decisive leadership by filling his cabinet with many technocrats and professionals such as B.J. Habibie, Mukti Ali, Daud Jusuf, Emil Salim and many others.

Yudhoyono, however, has been compromised by various voices and interests, leaving him little room to build his own image as a determined leader.

As a Javanese knight, he does indeed seek to create a

harmonious political tone by avoiding explicit confrontation with political parties. He wants everyone to be happy — a tactic which often leads to everyone's disappointment.

In the cabinet, he entrusted important positions to those who had neither expertise nor passion, such as at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection and the Ministry of Communications and Information.

Yudhoyono prefers to support those whose political capital can support his political stance as opposed to those whose expertise are needed in this country. Politics, not expertise, is the commander. His second term reflects this.

To make the waters muddier, there is a rumor that the First Lady wants to throw her hat in the ring during the next presidential election, but Yudhoyono himself has dismissed the speculation.

The prospects of Anas Urbaningrum, a young promising Democratic Party leader, were hampered by many who were not happy with fast regeneration.

Acceleration is not always a favorite. As a top democratic leader, he seems to be faced with many serious hurdles to overcome in his path to presidential bid.

The Indonesian economy is in a better mood now. The growth of the domestic market has been further boosted by an increase in consumption. They have almost forgotten the smell of crisis.

But the reputation of Yudhoyono's party is has dropped from 20 percent in 2009 election to 18 percent, according to the survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute. The status quo is engulfing the Democratic Party. Corruption issues are slowly marching on the ruling party.***

Yellow card for President Yudhoyono

Yogyakarta, August 30, 2010

Due to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's (SBY) sluggish and infirm response to religious violence and intolerance, a yellow card should be issued. A whistle should be blown. Halt the train for a moment, time for reflection.

A referee should warn Ruhut Sitompul — a Democrat politician and a member of the House of Representatives who fished in the murky water to test the public — not to even think of a third term.

"Behold SBY!" (Please forgive the referee who substitutes Ruhut's name for SBY, or on the other way around). "Your record is yellow, close to red." Be serious.

A yellow card means warning, whereas a red one means stop – enough is enough. Please, never turn the yellow into a red card. A green card — meaning peace, environmentally friendly, a card issued by the United States government to allow non-United States citizens to work there, and that the show must go on – is preferable.

Ruhut beat the drum, echoing the possibility of SBY's third term, ironically amid the fire directed at SBY's lame duck. The

nickname "Mr. Doubter" lingers.

Minority groups, for example, members of Ahmadiyah and Christians, become the target of attack by the hardliners, for example the FUI (Islamic Community Forum) and the FPI (Islam Defenders Front)), whose leaders and members never give up exhibiting their shallow rhetoric in the public.

When a chance came, they seized it. There is always a temptation in their minds, whenever streets and roads are empty, to hold mass rally. They feel invited whenever an issue can be twisted.

Issues surrounding Ahmadiyah and Indonesian Christians, which the FPI still want to sell, are old. Indeed, nobody, except the FPI and the like, want to buy it.

True, until early 20th century, Muslims and Christians were suspicious of each other, due to complicated elements of the native Indonesians, the Dutch government, and inter-religious relations.

TH. Sumartana, a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue, has touched upon this issue.

However, Christianization in Indonesia, which concerned both most NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah leaders from the 1970s to 1980s, is a sheer myth, which the New Order regime used very well in the effort of managing the conflict between Muslims and Christians for the benefits of the government (it sounds like divide et impera, divide and rule). An Indonesian scholar, Mujiburrahman, wrote this.

Back to the point. Mosques and churches, built by minorities, are now in danger. Religious harmony and tolerance are in peril. Religious and ethnic diversity, which should be part of Indonesians' identity, are threatened.

It is a paradox that the Americans are now discussing whether a mosque can be built at Ground Zero, the WTC (World Trade Center) site in Manhattan, New York city — the target of the 9/11 attack. The Americans are debating how to differentiate between true Islam and al-Qaeda, between moderate Muslims and radicals, and between religion and fundamentalism.

But here in Indonesia, people are witnessing that mosques and churches have been destroyed. People performing religious rites are ambushed. What a shame.

Once again, in his second term, can SBY appear in the public

with steadfastness and audacity?

In theory, he must be. He was elected with a landslide victory. The Indonesians gave mandate wholeheartedly. However, it is up to SBY alone to show us that he deserves this second chance.

Thus, the speed should be accelerated, the seatbelt should be fastened, the steadfastness should be shown, and the audacity should be exhibited. All of this should be done, before a red card becomes a theme in the public.

Note that SBY and all his staff know very well that only one factor such as religious intolerance will unlikely lead the President to step down.

You know, both Sukarno's and Soeharto's tumble was due to more complex factors, for example, the economy, and political and social mayhem. Nonetheless, keep reminding SBY to guard our harmonious diversity.

Do not forget that there are also more issues in the limelight.

SBY's commitment to eradication of corruption is lately questionable. Some of those who were jailed due to corruption cases have been granted remission.

Additionally, the dignity of Indonesians may have been disturbed again, and the government's reputation in defending its own citizens and solving the problem appropriately is at stake.

Hundreds of Indonesian migrant workers are faced with the death penalty in Malaysia.

Ruhut never dares to announce the third term of SBY in a microphone with confidence. Behave Ruhut, behold SBY.***

The phenomenon of Anas Urbaningrum

Yogyakarta, June 07, 2010

Although there is no guarantee that fresh blood will supply innovative ideas and a "new spirit", we still hope that a younger mind and soul should play a greater role in national leadership.

In the aftermath of reformation, old faces still dominate the political arena. Some analysts and commentators are worried that the process of regeneration does not run efficiently.

Reformation fails to produce new leaders. Old players are too strong, a situation which thwarted the birth of new leaders.

In the recent years, three are young potential leaders — Rizal Mallarangeng, who already devoted a certain amount of energy and money to advertise his candidacy for president via the media, Yuddy Chrisnandi, a former candidate for Golkar chairman, and Ulil Abshar-Abdalla, one of the founders of JIL (Liberal Islamic Network) who threw a hat in the NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) leadership arena — failed.

Now, Anas Urbaningrum becomes the chairman of the Democratic Party. Does it mean that an Indonesian Obama has come? Do not rush to a conclusion.

The case of Rizal is as follows. Once he said: "I do not run on

behalf of myself, but on behalf of a generation. I respect President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Gus Dur, the Sultan [of Yogyakarta], and Amien Rais. But, they should not be alone."

Rizal then rhetorically asked: If another country can produce new leaders, why can't Indonesia? After 10 years (of reformation) why should only Gus Dur and Amien (dominate the Indonesian political landscape).

However, having surveyed that the chance is not much; the system was not ready; the politics were still dark; and he is not welcome in the ring — Rizal gave up his venture. All campaign activities in the office of Jl. Yusuf Adiwinata 29, Menteng were terminated. The dream of a young candidate for president was postponed in this way.

The bid of Yuddy to chair Golkar cast another story. He reportedly declared: "I run for [the position as Golkar chairman], not because I am young, but because my friends and I are motivated to ensure Golkar win the 2014 general election."

Unfortunately, he was not attractive enough for Golkar politicians. He gained almost no vote.

In the wake of his defeat, he moved from Golkar to Hanura, another party led by Wiranto — a known general who also left Golkar, which later supported him as the candidate of vice president with Jusuf Kalla as the candidate of president.

According to the Javanese myth, a satria piningit (hidden knight) is expected to appear during despair. This knight is perhaps young, a newcomer, who is not known in the arena yet.

However, some analysts and commentators are realistic. Yet they were often impatient.

New, true reformed minded Indonesian leaders are not coming as fast as we expect.

Ulil also promised hope. His attempt to run for NU chairman is bold. He is known for his liberal ideas, which often burned the ears of many conservatives and radicals.

If he were chosen, more progressive ideas would be injected in this biggest Muslim organization in the country.

However, Ulil was not the "hidden knight", at least not for the majority of NU leaders. Not yet.

It is perhaps safe to conclude that after reformation, Anas is the first young leader who led the biggest political party.

Bear in mind that the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle) has chosen to stay with their Ibu, Megawati Soekarnoputri, rather than flying away from their nest.

The younger cadres feel safe in a tranquil house. Do not mess up the living room. Stay calm and be sweet.

Learning from history, Indonesia in this reformation era does not give enough space for young blood.

In the early 20th century, when the ethical policy bore fruit, almost all associations and organizations — be they inspired by the spirit of nationalism, Islam, socialism, or communism — were founded by young students and intellectuals.

They were indeed young and highly spirited. They were idealistic, risking their life. True, they went back and forth from one jail to another.

In that era, the Dutch colonial government "watched" them. Yet the circle of leadership among Indonesians in this archipelago and the Netherlands run dynamically. When a certain leader was arrested, another emerged.

When a certain ideology died out, a new ideology came. When an old form of struggle was out of date, a new method was adopted.

At that time, there were indeed many ideologies which came and went. Older generation, such as Noto Suroto and Abdul Rivai, were in favor of a cooperative approach with the Dutch government in their struggle to elevate the fate of Indonesians.

New leaders, such as Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Sjahrir, stressed the independence of Indonesians' own confidence in their struggle for independence.

A more radical approach in refusing to cooperate with the Dutch colonial rulers were also later adopted.

Historians, such as Harry Poeze, told us that once Hatta and Sjahrir were expelled from the Perhimpunan Indonesia (PI/ Indonesian Association), as the new generation of the PI were more radical.

The point is that the circle of leadership was dynamic.

In short, if we want to take a lesson from the best generation, who delivered this nation to independence, we should give more room to both new players and their ideas.

Anas is perhaps not totally new in politics, although he is now likely the youngest among the chairmen of all political parties in Indonesia.

His political activities have started since his youth in the HMI (Indonesian Muslim Student Association), the KPU (General Election Commission), and Golkar.

Accordingly, the extent to which Anas differs his own leadership and style from those of Yudhoyono, Gus Dur, Megawati, Wiranto, Prabowo, Jusuf Kalla, and Akbar Tandjung remains unclear.

However, more young players should be welcome in the ring. We do expect that more Obamas are born in this land.

Now, Anas Urbaningrum becomes the chairman of the Democratic Party. Does it mean that an Indonesian Obama has come?***

The ruling party now at the crossroad

Yogyakarta, July 24, 2011

The Democratic Party, under the shadow of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's charisma, which has charmed Indonesians for two terms, is now at a crossroads.

The current scandal with its former treasurer Muhammad Nazaruddin acting as a whistle-blower seems to have determined not only which direction the party will go, but also on which characters the party will be built.

Now that the party executives are regrouping in Sentul, West Java, we will soon know whether the party has done its homework — such as cleaning dirty dishes, washing muddy clothes, repairing the leaking roof, repainting the walls and throwing out the garbage — or if it has left these jobs undone to be forgotten about by the people and the media.

For the party's leaders, there are many options available. It is absolutely up to them whether they are decent politicians or mere opportunists.

Not only are good politicians committed to the image of the party, they also have shown responsibility to control the damage

caused by the mayhem.

On the other hand, there are those who want to just wash their hands and find loopholes to escape. When the party is on the rise they were happy to join.

The party's declining image did not bother them. In fact, it is common for politicians to jump from one political party to another.

The way in which SBY and the Democratic Party won the hearts and minds of Indonesians was indeed phenomenal. Indonesians now will witness the survival and longevity of the ruling party.

Golkar's ability to adapt to a new political environment is indeed worthy of reflection. Unlike in the aftermath of the 1965 upheaval in which old players under Sukarno's patron no longer had any control over the political stage, old players in the reform period, chiefly Golkar politicians, remained visible on the stage.

In fact, a significant number of voters remained loyal to Golkar, which used to serve as Soeharto's political vehicle. Soeharto's name could be damaged at least for a while.

However, politicians who were under him have many ways to escape. To disguise their misconduct during the New Order regime, political leaders gave the Golkar Party a new brand in the pro-reform movement.

Only time will tell whether the Democratic Party follows in Golkar's footsteps, or if it has its own way to show its mettle.

Indonesians are indeed forgiving. Sukarno's dictatorship during the Old Order period has been written off. His figure has been restored and has emerged as an icon of several political parties to attract voters.

By the same token, it seems Soeharto's sins have been washed away by political pragmatism. Indeed, Soeharto's achievements in economic stability can be sold in the political market. The Golkar Party is not alone. The PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) also took this political advantage.

Many scandals and corruption cases have been easily forgotten. What about the Bank Century bailout? Who killed Munir? Who were the real culprits in the "crocodile versus gecko" saga?

It is not out of line to expect that the boiling news about the current scandal involving key figures in the Democratic Party will

be gone as quickly as the other corruption cases. The accusations made against Anas Urbaningrum — a secret weapon unleashed by Nazaruddin from his hideout — will also be rinsed with his calmness and smiles on TV.

True, the Democratic Party promised changes and reform, by which it defeated the old players in Golkar and the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle).

However, promises in politics are just promises, as long as they sound wonderful to the ears of voters.

SBY's party has been the most successful among all new parties to emerge during the reform era. Its success is owed to its open platform. The party is not affiliated to a certain religious sentiment. In fact, parties with such a sentiment have never won the majority of votes in any of Indonesia's elections.

In terms of regeneration, the PKS and the Democratic Party are the most promising parties. Like it or not, the PKS applies a healthy mechanism by which its leadership is dynamic. It's top leaders are changed from time to time.

As for the Democratic Party, Anas Urbaningrum is currently the youngest top executive. Golkar and PDI-P have both failed to follow in a similar direction. The leadership of other parties, from Gerindra to the PPP (United Development Party), the PKB (National Awakening Party), and the PAN (National Mandate Party), have not been as dynamic as we expected.

Now, the Democratic Party is at the crossroads, and we are wondering which way the party will turn.***

Political pragmatism prevails in Indonesia

Heidelberg, February 19, 2008

No matter how doubtful it is, we have to welcome and encourage the efforts made by the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) to welcome and appreciate pluralism in Indonesian politics. This point was explained in detail by PKS president, Tifatul Sembiring, PKS secretary general, Anis Matta, and PKS faction chairman at the House of Representatives, Hilmi Aminuddin at the recent national congress in Bali.

Initially a party based exclusively on Islamist reform, the PKS has evolved to appeal to a much broader constituency including the mainstream secular audience. The change is largely the result of pragmatism triggered by the party's need to secure electoral support. It may be seen as a response to the democratic process.

The PKS agenda at the congress in Bali cast no new story. It seems clear that there are at least two fundamental factors behind its latest political maneuver. First off, is a recognition of the fact that in many local elections, the PKS has formed political coalitions with nationalist as well as secular parties. These include alliances with the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle), Golkar Party, and even the PDS (Prosperous Peace Party). These

types of coalitions are expected to attract more potential voters in next year's general election. What the PKS has learned is that the vast majority of Indonesians do not like any tendency toward exclusivism or radicalism.

Indonesia's plural society tends to embrace moderate religious views. In response to this sentiment, the PKS has attempted to cater to market demands. Not only is this political maneuver tactical, but it is also relevant to the audience targeted by PKS campaigns.

Two issues remain vital with regards to the PKS' attitude toward pluralism. First of all, it has to remain vigilant for any possible twisted interpretation of pluralism serving merely as a means of political posturing. Secondly, the PKS needs to remain consist in embracing its core values. Any attitude on the part of party members that contradicts the principle of pluralism must be abandoned.

By advancing its agenda along this path the PKS will distance itself from any radical Islamist ideology such as that proffered by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood; rather it will follow in the moderate footsteps of Turkey's AKP (Justice and Development Party). By adhering to the former, the party would remain transfixed to its earlier commitment to establish sharia. By pursuing the more practical stance of the latter it would accept secularization and modern democracy with no conditions.

My acquaintance with PKS cadres in Germany, however, tells another story. It is well known, for example, that the PKS is the most active of all Indonesian political parties in terms of recruiting new members and potential voters abroad. No other Indonesian political party has managed to develop a campaign infrastructure abroad as sophisticated as that of the PKS. Neither Golkar, the PDI-P, the PKB (National Awakening Party), the PAN (National Mandate Party), nor the PPP (United Development Party) have established party headquarters in Germany. In contrast, the PKS regularly holds activities.

The PKS has, for example, sponsored and maintained many *pengajian* (mass prayers) for Indonesian students in Germany. The monthly pengajian are held in many cities. In some cases, the party has brought well known *ustadz* (Muslim preachers) from Indonesia to Germany to provide *dakwahs* (sermons) at the pengajian.

Although the *ustadz* did not announce to their audiences that they were sent by a political party it has been something of a public secret for many Indonesians who live Germany that political consolidation by the PKS is taking place.

Pluralism is *bid'ah* (innovation). Within the political realm, this is a recent concept, but then what in todays social landscape is not an innovation? Everything, it seems, is a recent invention. Democracy, human rights, feminism, mass communications, transportation, political parties and Ulema councils are all new innovations which could not be found at the time of the Prophet. Even the Unitary State of Indonesia is an innovation.

By accepting pluralism, the PKS can be proud to call itself an Islamic party that has embraced innovation. As a rule, the more the PKS commits to innovation, the more open and attractive will the party become.

One more fundamental task for the PKS remains; that is, to revise its ideological basis. The PKS no longer accords with Wahhabism, an ideology which takes its root in Islamic puritanism. As Wahhabism stands against innovation the PKS movement away from its doctrine stands to reason. Adherence to Wahhabism can only cast doubt on the PKS' commitment to pluralism.

Without a strong commitment to innovate and embrace pluralism, the PKS' recent maneuvers would merely become a political strategy to face next years general election. Suspicion of PKS' motives might be based on its previous maneuvers to disguise its political campaigns during the sermons given at the many mass prayers that its sponsors. If such suspicion is well-founded then it would stand to reason that the PKS is also attempting to disguise its puritanism and conservatism through its recent posturing.***

Why a coalition of Islamic parties is impossible

Yogyakarta, April 15, 2014

An increase of vote shares for the PKB (National Awakening Party), the PAN (National Mandate Party) and the PPP (United Development Party) and the slight decrease of votes for the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party) in the April 9 legislative election sparked euphoria among parties that claim to represent Muslim voters.

Not only does the surprising result prove the pre-election surveys that predicted a decline in the performance of Islamic parties wrong but it also places the parties in a strategic bargaining position vis-a-vis nationalist-oriented parties, the PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle), the Golkar Party and the Gerindra Party '€" the top three in the standings, in shaping coalitions for the presidential election.

Support has loomed for the Islamic-based parties to form a coalition to nominate a president, given the fact that their combined votes exceed the threshold.

These Islamic parties could perhaps emulate the 1999 move of the Axis Force pioneered by PAN founder Amien Rais to catapult NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) leader Abdurrahman 'Gus Dur' Wahid to the presidency at the expense of Megawati Soekarnoputri, chairwoman of the PDI-P, which had won the legislative election that year.

The idea of reviving the alliance of Islamic parties sounds seductive and tempting.

However, this scenario is very unlikely to happen.

The truth is that it would be better for any of the Islamic-based parties to join forces with secular and nationalist parties. Leaders of the Islamic parties, however, would not surrender to other Islamic parties. Their interests would overlap each other.

Like other parties in this country, the Islamic-based parties are actually pragmatic, if not opportunistic, and tend to form alliances with any party that stands a big chance of winning the presidency. Their aim of joining the next government is too obvious, as no party would risk becoming an opposition force in the first place.

It is no exaggeration to conclude that the Islamic aspirations the parties are promoting are only a tactic to attract Muslim voters.

The PKB, for example, exploited the popularity of *dangdut* singer Rhoma Irama and former Constitutional Court chief justice Mahfud MD to woo voters.

While the tactic worked, there is no guarantee that either of their names will be offered to a coalition partner as a vice presidential candidate.

It will come as no surprise if PKB chairman Muhaimin Iskandar seizes the best opportunity on the table, offering himself to run as the running mate for either presidential candidates Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo or Prabowo Subianto.

PKB leaders will accept the more beneficial scenario. The party most likely to follow in the footsteps of PKB is PAN, as the two are part of the outgoing administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

However, both PKB and PAN are by nature in competition, as their traditional voters, NU and Muhammadiyah respectively, are archrivals on both social and political stages. The rivalry was evident in the race for the posts of education and culture minister and religious affairs minister under Yudhoyono's Cabinet.

Also note that indeed PAN has approached the PDI-P, offering its chairman Hatta Rajasa to be Jokowi's running mate. As Indonesian politics is unpredictable, PAN may also accept Golkar's or Gerindra's offer to form a coalition. NU and Muhammadiyah will only unite, however, when they face their common enemy: the

PKS.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that PKS, with its strong new Islamist activism under the shadow of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideology, will bow to the leadership of traditionalist NU. Like other parties, the PKS is both pragmatic and opportunistic, but when it comes to interpreting Islam, it differs from the NU.

The PKS looks more comfortable joining Golkar party or Gerindra party, although it does not negate any opportunity offered by the PDI-P.

The only party with neutrality to ally with any Islamic party in the presidential race due to the complexity of its voters is the PPP (United Development Party). The majority of the voters come from the NU.

However, PPP chairman Suryadharma Ali triggered infighting with the party for attending a Gerindra campaign event, while at the same time, other PPP leaders want to join the more promising PDI-P coalition. The internal rift may cost Suryadharma his position in the party.

With the PKB unlikely to lead a coalition of Islamic parties, it is impossible for PAN, PKS and PPP to take over the responsibility due to their insignificant share of the vote. Thus, unless a miracle descends from heaven, a coalition of Islamic parties in the presidential election is unlikely to materialize.

Now, along with the rise of conservatism in the country, political Islam seemed to revive in the election.

However, Islam as a political power remains far from a threat to the secular attitude adopted by most Indonesian Muslims in politics. It is the pragmatism of Islamic party leaders that still prevails.***

We speak the language of humans, not of crocodiles

Bochum, Nopember 10, 2009

A crocodile is a dangerous predator, whose mere prehistoric look already scares victims. Due to its thick skin, strong teeth, dinosaur shape, and calm appearance, this reptile becomes a symbol of crime due to its tricky behavior in catching victims effortlessly. A gecko, on the other hand, is a small lizard, whose chirping sounds accompany many Indonesian families before bedtime.

Indonesians label a man who can give false promises to many girls easily as a crocodile, which has now earned a new pejorative designation from the Indonesian public. Many Indonesians, who dream of earning a lot of money instantly, lately have been hunting a big gecko, whose colorful skin is attractive and whose sounds are loud. This lizard is priced at millions of rupiahs, due to its repetitive sounds and weight. The more weight a big gecko is, and the more consistent its sound is, the more expensive it becomes.

It started when the three law enforcement institutions, the Polri (National Police), the AGO (Attorney General's Office), and the KPK (Corruption Eradication Commission) became involved in the tragedy.

The story of hunting geckos is more or less similar to that of

gelombang cinta, aka *anthurium*, a subtropical indoor plan which used to be sold for millions of rupiahs. But now, you can find abundance of pots with these plants in the verandas of houses in Jakarta and Yogyakarta easily. However, the *gelombang cinta* is not a queen any longer, and nobody wants to spend millions rupiahs on this plant.

Poor gecko! Poor anthurium!

Like the crocodile, the gecko has earned a new label. It has become a symbol of a crocodile's victims. The cruel crocodile can easily eat the gecko, which is beautiful, small, and weak.

Whereas gecko's sounds attract listeners (who often patiently count whether its repetitive voices are odd or even, and relate them to a bad or good luck), the crocodile never speaks.

It threatens other animals. It waits for any victims silently on the bank of the river, and camouflages its body in mud; as soon as a victim approaches the predator ambushes. Strong teeth in a long big mouth stop the victims from escaping.

Before this crocodile versus gecko drama, the public was entertained by another show, namely hunting terrorists. In this drama, the protagonists and antagonists were clear. The police force, supported by the Indonesian society, is the hero, who, like Rambo, Batman, Spiderman, or Gatotkaca (a hero in the story of a shadow puppet show), slayed the villains. The hunting was successful, and the audience applauded loudly. The hero deserves credit, and the society takes a deep breath. Bravo the police force!

Now, in the drama of crocodile versus gecko, the real crocodiles are still blurred, whether they are parts of the law institutions or just opportunist brokers. Or both. If any law enforcers are involved, self-surgery in their institutions is necessary. While this piece was written, two high-ranking officials of the two law institutions officially resigned. In the New Order period, to resign was meant to give up, not showing humility or responsibility. But Soeharto, whose presidency lasted more than three decades, finally resigned during the turmoil.

The crocodile versus gecko drama has no hero. The drama flows naturally. The geckos, symbolizing the framed KPK leaders, are the first victims. Nobody can claim to be the hero.

Yet some - the victims, the people, the media, and the pundits

- indeed have played their own roles. They are true heroes.

The victims have suffered a lot. The students and pundits have voiced their moral messages via mailing lists, Facebook and personal websites. The media has reported every move of the gecko and any potential crocodile.

This drama is so open. So is the record of conversation between "self-proclaimed crocodiles", which was played in the Constitutional Court. The transcript of this conversation has been displayed in every Indonesian newspaper. Nothing is hidden.

Where are the Indonesian political parties? Whom do they represent? The people? Or their own interests?

In fact, the people can speak on their own behalf in this drama of crocodile versus gecko. The people speak a human language, not that of crocodiles.

Where are those who protested against and banned Miyabi's visit to Indonesia for the sake of morality? Where are the proponents of sharia in many local areas? Do they include the eradication of corruption in their moral agenda? Their voice is not heard. I cannot hear you..!***

The apparent battle: The politicians against the pundits

Montreal, January 16, 2009

Who is actually battling whom in the Indonesian public realm? Is the battle occurring between Muslim moderates and radicals? To some extent, this may be true. Yet it does not entirely portray what is going on in Indonesia.

Recall who supported the pornography bill and who opposed it. If we conclude that Muslim moderates are all annoyed by that already signed bill, and their fellow hard-liners are always prepared to support it, this would oversimplify the more complex reality.

True, this ambiguous and disputed law will fuel some more radicals to be vigilantes in the name of guarding religious morality.

However, if we take a closer look, this battle seems also to be between the politicians and the pundits. Be so surprised with this conclusion, as it's supported by the following signals.

Besides the voices from eastern parts of Indonesia, particularly Bali and Papua, during their demonstrations against the bill who else stood behind those voices? The answer is pundits, be they

artists, academics, writers, priests or community leaders.

Their voices have loudly been echoed. Yet our politicians, the House of Representatives and the executive, did not listen to them. Our politicians have gone on their own path proposing, drafting, revising, defending and finally signing that bill.

There is a huge gap, in that respect, between the politicians' attitudes and the advice offered by the pundits. Here is a great difference between the pundits and the politicians.

Whereas the pundits must be, and must have been, loyal to the true morality of this nation, the politicians are always tempted by some instant and pragmatic considerations.

The pundits, who avoid any immediate personal gain, look out for the long-term interest of the nation while the politicians must cautiously watch their popularity particularly when the general election is approaching.

The pundits may make their opinion known, even if they are against the common people, as they have no interest in gaining public support for their positions.

The politicians, on the other hand, calculate every step and how it is improving their image or damaging it.

However, in Indonesia, the position of the pundits and the politicians are often mixed. Some of our leaders have attempted to play the roles of both.

Unsurprisingly, we are over and over again confused about which voices should resonate -those intended as a guide for true morality or those designed for instantaneous beneficial political purposes. We have to be careful in digesting those voices.

Don't swallow every edict, even if it is pronounced by those who wear robes and hold Rosario. At the same time,throw away the advice of those whose hair is long and uncombed. The latter may be wali (saint).

Some NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) and Muhammadiyah leaders, such as Ahmad Syafi'i Ma'arif and Mustofa Bisri, offer truly genuine advice, which the ummah (Muslim community) can follow.

However, there is no secret anymore that some leaders from both organizations often use religious sentiments of their ummah to support their political ambitions.

The prospect of being a vice presidential candidate to one of the presidential candidates seems to have tempted them.

Nevertheless, here is an example of the pragmatism of one of the leaders of the Islamist political party, the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), which tries to mix political and religious authority. After courting Soeharto's family and cronies, by forging images of his heroic side, the leader of that political party and current speaker of the MPR (People's Consultative Assembly), Hidayat Nur Wahid, is now tempting the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) to plunge into a debate over its religious and political authority.

That is, Wahid endorsed the MUI to pronounce an edict, that would prohibit (*haram*) those whovote (*golput*) in the next general election.

Whose voice is that? That of the pundits for the sake of true morality or that of politicians who use religion on the political stage? Is that the voice of those worried about losing votes?

All in all, the politicians may have triumphed in this public battle as they have sometimes deprived the pundits of religious and moral authority by using political power. The pundits, on the other hand, should never tire of voicing that true morality - be it religious or cultural wisdom - that remains in their hands. Those who play double roles are mere phony-pundits. ***

Indonesian intellectuals must raise their voices

Heidelberg, December 7, 2007

Indeed, it is weird, if not ridiculous, that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council) recently barred Prof. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, from speaking at the Annual Conference on Islamic Studies in Riau and another international seminar at Islamic University Malang. The reason for the ban is that some local Muslim organizations do not want Professor Abu Zayd to speak, suspecting elements of "apostasy" would be brought to Indonesia by this avant-garde Egyptian scholar. It goes without saying this argument is supported by radical ideologies.

The oppressive and harsh attitudes of this local MUI leads to nothing but increasing the awful track record of this institution in the recent years as clumsy in responding the current situation. It also tends to show MUI's failure to grasp what is really going on in this sophisticated world.

MUI has failed to guide common people to the better and educated Indonesian society. Instead of performing this task, such as by teaching this society about the values of tolerance in order to become a more open and democratic society, MUI has taken the

advice of radical groups to gain sympathy from them.

The more this situation continues, the more radical MUI becomes; so much so, that no one can differentiate between radicalism and MUI.

One may be inclined to relate this tragedy to the totalitarianism confronting Saeful Badar -- who happens to be the recent recipient of a medal for democracy from the International Association of Political Consultants. In August, his satirical prose piece *Malaikat* (Angel) appeared in the *Pikiran Rakyat* daily in Bandung and he was threatened and intimidated by radical groups.

Worse still, Rahim Asyik Purwanto lost his job as editor of the daily. The radical groups once again intimidated the daily due to their narrow-minded false assumption that the prose conveyed religious blasphemy.

Among official and yet blatant vandalism in Indonesia is the burning and destroying of books on Indonesian history in many cities by many local governments. These books are assumed to contain misleading information about the uprising of the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) in 1965.

Sadly, the voices of intellectuals -- to name a few -- like Asvi Warman Adam (a known historian), Goenawan Mohamad (a leading journalist), Franz Magnis Suseno (a true religious leader), Ariel Heryanto (a political scientist) and Ganjar Pranowo (a politician) are never heard.

The sinful acts of our society, indeed, seem to reach the level of unbearable when one remembers the official threat to Bersihar Lubis, a writer who will be brought to court for an "annoying" op-ed column appearing in the national media. The story goes that the justice in that case felt insulted by the word "dumb" in a piece protesting book burning.

Returning to the case of Prof. Abu Zayd, just bet this local MUI doesn't fully grasp Abu Zayd's thought, which exists in an academic context very different from theirs. These highly academic works promote a new understanding of our holy scripture, the Koran. One needs to understand philosophy, hermeneutics, and literary criticism -- among other fields -- to follow the arguments.

For that matter, the MUI, needs could benefit from some fresh thinking, at all levels. It would be better either to accommodate the

younger and more progressive Muslim scholars in making certain decisions or else let them join the institution.

Every edict pronounced should be based on the expertise of that field, not limited merely to the *halal* (allowed) versus *haram* (prohibited) paradigm. Enlightenment is what Indonesian society needs.

It is urgent, indeed, that academic activities in Indonesia, are given protection by those in power. There should be space for such activities in secure universities and, ideally, no one should interfere with them."***

Intellectual Argument versus Mass Rally

Heidelberg, August 24, 2007

What a coincidence that in the last week we encountered two opposing incidents: the fruitful discussion of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im's newest work, which was published in Indonesian -- *Islam dan Negara Sekular: Menegosiasikan Masa Depan Syari'ah* (*Islam and Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*) -- and the international caliphate conference held by Hizbut Tahrir in Senayan over the weekend.

In strengthening the thesis of his previous works, Ahmed An-Na'im reminds us again about political and ideological efforts by the state to formalize sharia at the public level. Sharia, according to him, should be practiced piously and voluntarily at the individual level, and its formalization, such as in the form of public law or policy, will result in a single interpretation, which could bring about repression.

A leading Indonesian intellectual, Prof. Azyumardi Azra, says this book deserves our attention for its relevance, particularly to the current Indonesian situation. On the other side, in front of 90,000 people at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium, Muhammad Ismail Yusanto clearly rejected democracy

(*The Jakarta Post*, Aug. 12). It is not hard to guess the simple and naive rhetorical reason behind the statement that "the highest sovereignty is in the hand of God".

It is irrelevant to compare, to any extent, the arguments contained in the academic work of an-Na'im -- and the like -- and those of Ismail Yusanto and his supporters. The theory, methodology and the approach of the former have undoubtedly been based on at least a passionate three years of research.

On the contrary, the expressions of the latter are likely motivated by the sake of popularity and public support for plain ideological and political agendas and gains. In short, we cannot compare between deep reason and emotion, scholarly work and ideological expression, or careful investigation and shallow rhetorical public speech. However, it is interesting to observe how the public responded to both. By doing so, we can perhaps see in a glimpse the public use of reasoning.

Once again, the audiences of an-Na'im and that of the caliphate conference are entirely different. Although reviews of the work of the former can easily be found in newspapers, on websites or circulated in certain mailing lists, the number of readers is still very limited, unfortunately.

However, we should not worry too much. Yusanto himself acknowledged his conference was neither aimed directly at establishing immediately an Islamic caliphate, nor was it related to the declaration of any Islamic party. The Jakarta gathering itself was more like a rock concert.

Many participants went there to show solidarity, not for curiosity, let alone for understanding. It is tempting to guess that as soon as they went home, they forgot the speeches. However, the spirit of the meeting remained intact, albeit without any change to their thinking from before and after the conference.

The analogy of a rock concert seems reasonable here in that if one likes the rock star, there is no need to find any reason and it is not important to listen to the songs sung at the concert. Just enjoy and be satisfied.

Turning to the work of an-Na'im, it is still consumed in limited circles. Yet it is still uncertain whether the stance of an-Na'im or that of Hizbut Tahrir will win the hearts of the Indonesian people in the long run.***

Crop circles: Old and new myths in the making

Yogyakarta, February 04, 2011

Yogyakarta, with a population diverse in ethnicities, faiths, and cultures, is a miniature of Indonesia. You may also argue that other cities feature the same characteristics as those of Yogyakarta.

Accepted. Whereas people come to Jakarta, and perhaps also to Surabaya, Medan and other cities, to seek jobs or pursue careers, Yogyakarta's reputation rests in its excellent universities. But do not misunderstand what Yogyakarta really is.

Yogyakarta is a supernatural city. Likewise, Indonesia is not a real country, but a paranormal entity. Without understanding magic, myth and the supernatural, you will never understand Yogyakarta or Indonesia.

This sultanate city, like Indonesia, is filled with rumors, gossip and mythologies. People do not see reality directly as it is. Rather, they imagine things beyond reality. The truth is not what you see, but what you can imagine.

The volcanic eruption of Mount Merapi, which devastated some parts of northern Yogyakarta, is understood not merely as a natural phenomena. There is belief that the angry spiritual world sparked Merapi's fury. Many pinpoint that the sinful conduct of

people caused the punishment which befell Yogyakarta.

Similarly, Gayus is perceived not just as a man who was sentenced to seven years in prison due to his role in tax fraud. People believe that bigger fish, or players even more clever than Gayus were at fault.

The case of Gayus is not what it appears. There are more untold true stories behind the stories revealed by the media.

People do not see things as they seem. They imagine something much more intricate. The figure of Gayus becomes a myth, sensationalized by tales about how he escaped from jail and flew to Bali, Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore. Like it or not, people theorize to what extent they can imagine.

Gayus has already become a myth.

Disregarding whether it is a crucial issue or not, the public talked of the special status of Yogyakarta last month when President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono questioned the sultan's "granted" governorship. However, the people of Yogyakarta — scholars, journalists, artists, and NGO activists — tended not to focus on the subject of discussion. Rather, they were suspicious of SBY's intentions and wondered why he touched upon the issue.

These people speculated that SBY wanted to distract the public's attention — a gambit by which he hoped to escape from his own reality. It was only part of his political rhetoric, by which he wanted to hide other political agendas, such as his wife Anni Yudhoyono's quest for the presidency in the next election. In fact, SBY's failures are seen in law enforcement, combating corruption and guarding religious tolerance in the country.

Many wondered about the hundreds of families who were displaced by the Merapi eruptions, and why the central government was paying more attention to local politics.

Furthermore, arresting hardliners in the Central Java town of Surakarta suspected of having been involved in acts of terrorism was just another effort to distract the public's attention. Now a new myth is in the making.

Amidst the pessimistic views, confronted with weak law enforcement and the irritating facts of Gayus' trickery, news about a crop circle believed to have been formed by extraterrestrial beings found in a rice field in a village not far away from Prambanan

temple is sparking further controversy. Hundreds of men, young and old, sons and mothers, daughters and fathers, rushed to see the alleged evidence of a UFO landing. What does it imply? The answer seems intricate.

Indonesians love TV shows portraying the myth of a comfortable life, instead of the true bitter reality faced by most people. Most of the soap operas show a rich handsome young man and a beautiful girlfriend riding in a nice car, rather than people struggling against life's cruelty.

The news of a UFO landing in Yogyakarta offers more or less the same. To avoid dealing with what is challenging us now, why not imagine an alien spacecraft landing in a rice field?

When true reality fails to entertain us, why not create a myth that may obscure our own dissatisfaction?***

Mythical perceptions of nature and survival

Yogyakarta, Nopember 08, 2010

Keep in mind that the victims of natural disasters in Indonesia, such as the floods in Wasior, Papua, the tsunami in Mentawai, West Sumatra, and the volcanic eruption of Mount Merapi in Central Java, were not sinful people.

They did nothing wrong. Nor did they commit adultery or any other evil deeds. These disasters were not God's punishment.

Thus, insensitive remarks made by Tifatul Sembiring, the current communications and information Technology Minister, are absolutely unsympathetic. He said moral "depravity and decadence" had led to the natural catastrophes. This is simply a delusion.

Once again, the victims, like all Indonesians, are innocent people, but were plagued by misery, and because of this we have to extend our hands to help them. Condolences should be conveyed. Those who were drowned in the flood, swept by away by mountain-like waves, and burned by hot lava and ash were not punished because of their wrongdoings.

Remember that the most devastating disaster in the country's history was the tsunami that hit Aceh five years ago. But that

happened neither because the people were rebellious to the central government in Jakarta nor because they failed to enact Sharia law as they do now. In this case, religious norms and ethics are not the root causes.

It is true that certain natural catastrophes, such as global warming and flooding in Jakarta, were the consequences of mischievous human behavior. Man has somehow contributed to these miseries. We mankind are not committed enough to keep the balance of our ecosystem.

We have cut down too many trees in the forest, burned too much fuel, produced too vast a quantity of greenhouses gases, and failed to manage our cities wisely. We, mankind, are responsible for the destruction of some parts of this earth. Nature has been treated unfairly.

Nevertheless, natural disasters are often uncontrollable. It is beyond the ability of humans to avoid them. Scriptures and old chronicles — in their own ways — recorded the impacts of nature's cruelty on human cultures and civilizations.

Noah and his people were confronted with a great flood — a story preserved and reenacted several times in the Babylonian texts, Sumerian texts, the Bible, the Koran and other Mediterranean traditions.

Furthermore, the Bible and the Koran also record the accounts of tribes, people, and villages destroyed by earthquakes, heavy rain, fire and plagues.

As described in many science books, natural disasters and global climate change led to the extinction of the dinosaurs.

Just over a thousand years ago, the volcanic rage of Mount Merapi forced the old Javanese Kingdom to move from Central Java to East Java. Borobudur Temple, which stands as a testament to the ancient Javanese architecture, was buried by the volcano. An earthquake devastated Prambanan and other nearby temples many times.

From ancient times to present day, man has always faced nature's wrath — a challenge that has stimulated man's curiosity (from time to time) to further investigate the true forces of nature.

We Indonesians, surrounded by oceans and active volcanoes on the Ring of Fire should learn more lessons from nature. We

should be able to differentiate between scientific explanations and mythical belief, so that preventive action can be taken.

Mbah Marijan, who was believed to be the spiritual guardian of Mount Merapi as entrusted by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, did not heed warnings from geologists that the mountain was ready to erupt. By staying in his house on the slopes of the mountain he lost his life. Hot ash killed him.

His sad ending was not the result of his sins. But rather his mythical belief was the root cause of the grief. However, Mbah Marijan — like those who were hit by the tsunami in Mentawai, drowned by floods in Wasior and the two good men who tried to rescue him but instead died by his side — were innocent, not adulterous as theorized by Tifatul.

Mythical and religious perspectives, which can easily be distorted by preachers and politicians to make people afraid, still dominate our perception of nature. For the sake of our survival, warnings based on scientific observations and research should be heeded. Or else, Indonesians, like dinosaurs, will vanish.***

CHAPTER SIX
GLOBAL ISSUES

Indonesia is not adequately represented

Heidelberg, November 12, 2007

What has often concerned me, and perhaps many other Indonesians, is what was portrayed by the *International Herald Tribune* on October 29. The daily describes Indonesia as "the invisible giant of South East Asia". Whether it is a complement or with contempt, it is up to us interpret it. In either case, it leaves us with so many questions.

Among the questions is how to represent Indonesia better or more properly at the international level. In this regard, one may relate it to the latest visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to Jakarta.

Does this indicate that the Muslim world in general has already taken Indonesia into account in the international political arena? The answer could be yes and no.

The first may be true though, as Indonesia is a country with the largest Muslim population in the world. In addition, we can perhaps be proud of our achievement in advancing democracy. It is therefore important -- lets say from the political consideration -- for Mahmoud Abbas to visit Indonesia to win support for Palestine's peaceful struggle for sovereignty.

The second answer, however, may be true, too. This can be seen by when the Palestinian President also visited Malaysia and Brunei. Indonesia does not seem to make a difference from neighboring Muslim countries.

Forget about our record of corruption, problems with poverty, and less prioritized education in the state budget -- these have already embarrassed us enough. Let us find our remaining strength, that is our national assets as a plural society in terms of religions, cultures, traditions, and ethnicities. We used to be so proud of it, which might enable us to boast how tolerance we are with regard to our diversity.

Unfortunately, this is also not so well represented and not many nations know our unique character. The following illustration may confirm this.

In the last few months in Germany, the public debate about establishing a big mosque for Muslims in Cologne has been so heated. Pros and cons have colored the media ranging from newspapers, TVs, and even personal blogs. Not to mention that Cardinal Karl Lehmann made comments on the matter a few months ago; this has also invited a long public discussion.

To present his words directly, "*...dann mochte ich in Saudi-Arabien Gottesdienst halten durfen, ohne verhaftet zu werden* (...then I can also perform church-service in Saudi Arabia, without being bothered)."

What strikes me is why did he not recall St. Marie Church, known as Gereja Katedral, located just in the opposite of Istiqlal mosque in Jakarta. How proud I am, if any German mentions this symbol of tolerance in which two big houses of God belonging to different religions can stand side by side.

Unfortunately, some comments that I read in the internet rather recall the existence of some churches in Egypt or other Middle Eastern Muslim countries.

The position of Indonesia in the map of studies in Islam in general remains unclear. That said, in this field many still subscribe to the view that Islam in the country is still peripheral, if not marginal. The center of this religion, according to this perspective, is always in the Middle East.

If somebody wants to know more about Islam, it is therefore advisable to come to the countries in that region to learn their

cultures and languages.

Apart from what we have seen, not all are bad stories. It is worth remembering that Bogor last April became the host of the International Ulama Conference.

According to the results from the meeting, a peaceful solution for the crisis of Iraq was endorsed. Regardless of the effect of the meeting, the role of Indonesian Muslim leaders can be said to be central. At least Hasyim Muzadi-a leader of Nahdlatul Ulama-and Din Syamsuddin-a leader of Muhammadiyah-contributed in pioneering this meeting.

Lately, few works of young Indonesian scholars have appeared in the international publication, such as those of Fuad Jabali, Amirul Hadi, Fauzan Saleh, Arskal Salim, Noorhaidi Hasan, Etin Anwar, Nadirsyah Hussein and others. Some have also written in international journals. This, however, is still far from sufficient to represent Islam in Indonesia to the wider international audience.

Compared to the same works written by Middle Eastern or South Asian scholars, the latter is still much more dominant. How can one know the unique character of Indonesia, if Indonesians do not represent themselves sufficiently?

How can one know that secularization and democratization in the Muslim world took place not only in Turkey, but also more uniquely in Indonesia? Shall we wait for other foreign names to represent us? Then the younger generation will quote their works, for the sake of authority?

What we have mentioned slightly deals only with formal topics: political, social, and scholarly aspects of Indonesia. In other sectors, to use a wild guess, we are not in so different a situation.

Taking a train between Heidelberg and Mannheim, for example, my eye catches accidentally an advertisement of Malaysian tourism standing in one of the stations. In the picture, an Asian girl relaxes on the cradle hanged between two coconut-trees in a sunny beach. This leads me to think that we have many types of scenery that are more beautiful in numerous islands of Indonesia. The problem is that when and who will hang their pictures here.***

Obama's oratory: Recalling the sway of Sukarno

Montreal, January 27, 2009

Now that the number of United States presidents stands at 43, a comparison of their characteristics and leadership styles is possible. Prior to and after the inauguration ceremony, many United States columnists have related President Obama's qualities to those of his predecessors, ranging from Lincoln, Roosevelt and Kennedy to Clinton.

Indonesia, however, has had only six presidents, whose educational backgrounds and leadership styles differ significantly - a fine intellectual and orator, a military strategist, a religious scholar, a scientist, a passionate mother, and a harmonizer.

Many people feel deep down in their hearts that, all in all, Sukarno's preeminence remains unmatched by those who succeeded him.

Not only was he the founding father of this nation, he also made numerous eloquent speeches that communicated clearly to even the most down-to-earth in his audiences. His powerful charisma rested especially in his oratory. He spoke with a stirring and thunderous voice.

Similarities can be drawn between Obama and Sukarno.

Although Obama always stays cool, his speeches - including the one he delivered at his inauguration - have pushed me to think back on Indonesia's history, and to recall how Sukarno moved and energized his audience.

I am not the only one stirred to remember a great leader. Caroline Kennedy said she was so inspired by Obama because his oratory harkens back to the speeches of her father, John F. Kennedy. Having heard Obama as a candidate or now as president, people around the globe are now putting their faith and hope in him just as Indonesians did with Sukarno a while ago.

Certain parts of Obama's speech echoed those of his predecessors, recalling centuries-old, genuine United States patriotism. In the same way, Sukarno noted in his autobiography how he felt tied to many United States presidents.

He communed with them metaphorically: "Mentally I talked with Thomas Jefferson, with whom I feel friendly and close because he told me all about the Declaration of Independence he wrote in 1776. I discussed George Washington's problems with him. I relived Paul Revere's ride. I deliberately looked for mistakes in the life of Abraham Lincoln so I could argue the points with him (p. 39)."

Sukarno's autobiography was published under a telling title, which conveys how great leaders speak for the people they represent. *Bung Karno: Penyambung Lidah Rakyat* translated means, "the extension of the people's tongue.

Due to Sukarno's communicative superiority, Indonesians from my grandfather's generation from many walks of life took great pride in their country, even as they faced many obstacles as a young and struggling nation. I still remember vividly what my grandfather said when I asked him about Sukarno's surpassing oratorical skills. My grandpa said, "Maybe you remember Zainuddin MZ (a popular Muslim preacher) and his sermons from the 1990s? They never held a candle to Sukarno's way with words."

(Note that my grandfather was a member of Masyumi, a prominent Islamic political party which Sukarno banned. My grandfather's cupboard was full of pictures of the Masyumi leader Mohammad Natsir, and he often said he despised the fact both Sukarno and Soeharto had outlawed Masyumi.)

Despite that bone of contention he still recalled that Sukarno's eloquence was far unrivaled by the tedious style of many New Order bureaucrats who often stuttered with um, um, um, um..before repeating the mantra of that time: "according to Bapak President's guidance." "Sukarno was fluent," my grandfather said, "his ideas never ran empty, but flowed continuously. I was so proud of him being my president."

Sukarno's love for his people and nation is never doubted by his numerous biographers, be they Indonesians or not. He said, "the burning desire to set my people free was beyond mere personal ambition." His voice was the voice of his people, whom Sukarno listened to and always attempted to represent. This makes him a great leader.

In a similar vein, not only do Obama's words uttered at the inauguration represent the voice of Americans, but they also speak for those who were watching the event on televisions across the globe. "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth."

In this line from his address, heavily quoted in media around the world, Obama underlined his inclusive belief which goes beyond religion, ethnicity and nationality. He seems to be trying to serve as an extension of the tongue of the world's worried population, stressed by divisive conflicts and menacing wars.

Obama embraces all people, regardless who they are or what faith or nationality they profess. Americans are lucky to have such a great leader, just as Indonesians were to have Sukarno during our struggle for independence and early years of nationhood.

Indonesian soil and water contributed - no matter how much and to what extent - in the making of one world leader, Sukarno, and another, Obama, upon whose shoulders so many hopes now rest. We can only hope that more Obamas have been born, will be born, in this land.***

Obama among RI elites

Heidelberg, Montreal, July 28, 2008

Obamania has now spread throughout the world. Barack Obama -- whom many expect to be an agent of change for the United States image in world politics in the wake of the Bush presidency -- has become an icon consisting no longer of merely flesh and blood. Instead, Obama is now synonymous with a new hope not only for the United States but also for the rest of the world.

In Indonesia, unfortunately, only a few realize the significance of this Obamania, and fewer still are taking away a valuable lesson for Indonesia's elections from watching the United States prepare for its. Obamania, I bet, is very limited to a few intellectuals in Jakarta or other major cities in Indonesia.

Those who follow the news and world politics, and particularly those who study abroad, understand this phenomenon taking hold in the rest of the world. Their numbers are of course very limited compared to those who do not care about the United States elections.

My colleagues, Ulil Abshar Abdalla and Bramantyo Prijosusilo, are among those who are happy to see this Obamania take hold among the Indonesian elite. So am I. The difference is my two friends are optimistic, while I am pessimistic.

True, many Indonesians hope to have a younger politician -- or specifically a younger president -- who will bring real change to Indonesian politics. Put simply: Who does not want to see a young, attractive, smart, intellectual and promising Indonesian future president? Likewise, who is not bored with the same old faces who deliver the repetitive promises and boring rhetorical speeches on TV?

Every Indonesian wants change. Everybody is bored with the same old stories: crisis, inflation, corruption, price increases on fuel and commodities, violence in the name of religion, etc. The way in which Indonesians express their feelings, however, differs in line with what they hear, read and see -- be it TVs, newspapers, books, or mere hearsay.

Indeed, Obamania coincides well with the tenor of current Indonesian politics, a dream to have a young president for the 2009 election. Yes, Rizal Mallarangeng, Fajroel Rachman and Ratna Sarumpaet have thrown their hats into the ring. How serious they are is still questionable and far more questionable is how they might succeed.

Amien Rais' unsuccessful bid in 2004 is worth remembering. He was far more popular in the eyes of Indonesians than these three young Indonesian intellectuals, due to his role in beating the drum of reform.

No matter how bitter the reality, we have to face the fact there is almost no correlation between academic achievement and popularity in the eyes of Indonesians. Indonesia is neither the United States nor Germany. In those two countries, public debates, where politicians sell their promises, influence their popularity.

In those two countries, for example, any statements by Angela Merkel or Barack Obama are repeated by the media, which people consume daily. The people then justify their choice based on, for example, whether or not their promises might increase the quality of people's life. In this way, public reasoning plays its role.

The situation in Indonesia is far different. Our democracy is still based on mere quantity and is still far from achieving quality. To illustrate this point, the vote of one professor is equal to that of one *ojek* (motorcycle taxi) driver.

It is therefore better to have a hundred votes from *ojek* drivers than to have one vote from a professor. I am sure Mallarangeng, Rachman and Sarumpaet are better able to convince one professor. Yet I doubt their ability to win the hearts of a hundred *ojek* drivers.

Political parties, according to many young Indonesian intellectuals, have still failed to play their part in democratizing the country. These parties still lack truly democratic leaders, a situation these three intellectuals want to rectify.

However, without adhering to a particular party, running for Indonesian president remains infeasible; just imagine how many obstacles they will face in the nominating process alone. The fact these three have no political affiliation as yet also increases my doubts they will succeed.

My doubts are not due to my disagreement with their attempts but rather to my realistic view. I do hope for a miracle -- admittedly unlikely -- which will draw the attention of more Indonesians to weigh reasoning more than emotion or myth as they consider how they will vote.***

Responses to Gaza crisis: Self-restraint is needed

Montreal, January 07, 2009

The following may portray the way in which the Indonesian public has responded to the Israeli strikes on Gaza:

1) Condemning the "unjust war" (*The Jakarta Post*, Dec. 30, 2008) and expressing condolences to its victims;
2) Showing solidarity and making donations, which resulted in humanitarian aid along with the MER-C (Indonesian Emergency Rescue Committee) that reached Amman, Jordan, on Jan. 4;
3) Holding mass protests in many Indonesian cities; and
4) Urging Indonesian Muslims to boycott United States products (*The Jakarta Post*, Dec. 30, 2008).

The first response which emerged from various Indonesian societal groups -- politicians, intellectuals and religious leaders -- and which we have been bored with since the third day of the crisis, has demonstrated good educational reasoning.

Fortunately President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Azyumardi Azra (a Muslim intellectual) and Umar Shihab (of the MUI/ Indonesian Ulema Council) all mentioned in their statements that any conflict or violence, regardless of its perpetrators, harms the

most essential virtues of humanity.

In particular, Shihab and Azra both emphasized that it is our sense of humanity (not just solidarity among Muslims) that should lead us to show our concerns with the military operation whose victims already included hundreds dead and around 1,000 injured.

Shihab also warned of the irrelevance of the idea of a jihad to Palestine, as proposed by a certain radical group.

The second response -- which included emails circulating on certain mailing lists, attempting to appeal to our empathy with a picture of a dying women and her son -- was also helpful to Gaza victims. The good thing is this solidarity materialized in the form of a humanitarian mission.

Regarding the third and fourth responses, we need to restrain ourselves. As we have seen in many cases in the past, religious sentiments in the Indonesian public are easily exploited by certain radical groups, which always seem ready to grab onto any momentum they can.

As we have seen in the news, certain radical groups, which have already earned public condemnation (due to either their violent track records or extremist ideologies) are now exercising their maneuvers. They are regurgitating the same old rhetoric of hate and blind suspicion -- that enemies are everywhere and have made a conspiracy to destroy Islam and all Muslims around the world. The magnitude of danger of such provocation we have experienced already.

Similarly, not only does the call to boycott United States products fail to address the real problem, it also offers no solution. Rather, it creates another bigger problem. We have experienced this already too. It is worth recalling that due to some popular calls in protests over Dutchman Geert Wilders' movie, *Fitna*, Youtube was blocked in Indonesia, an action which caused nothing but disadvantage to many Indonesians.

As a consequence, we saw how isolated the Indonesian online community became without Youtube, didn't we?

In a similar vein, the call for Indonesians to boycott United States products will bring about more damage to our economy

which we are struggling to salvage from the brink of everlasting crisis.

As experiences should teach us, we need to be more cautious in stirring public religious emotion in the form of mass rallies, and particularly in isolating perspectives.

It is better to call on the public to remain sober, restrained, moderate and peaceful in expressing their empathy.

Once again, it is unwise to lean excessively toward one extreme or side with one party with a one-sided perspective. Indeed, it is not easy to expose two balanced perspectives. On the contrary, sticking with popular views with popular support seems comfortable and beneficial.

The Gaza crisis -- and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general -- whose matters are complex and delicate, requires a workable solution. And yet Indonesia, whose Muslim population is the largest in the world, may -- and has tried to -- play a certain role in seeking this, although we Indonesians do not necessarily fully understand the core dilemma, e.g. between Hamas, Fattah and Israel.

But Indonesia, in terms of location, is far away from the conflict zone, a fact which may offer a rather unique insight.

Radicalism in Indonesia, which has been triggered by (among other things) the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, is never a solution but adds to the problems.

Solidarity for injustice can lead to at least two conflicting actions: generous alms giving or extremism. Regarding the latter, let us recall the interviews with Imam Samudra (who was executed for his role in the Bali Bombings) which are still available online.

In one such interview, Samudra wears a blue shirt with no collar, and a black scarf around his head, and expresses his bitter disappointment with the current global political situation which is full of injustices, he says. Samudra repeatedly says the “enemy” has conspired to destroy Islam and Muslims, citing the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

It stands to reason to expect that certain radicalists will soon claim their violent acts in the name of Gaza victims, even in places far removed from the conflict zone. The perceived present injustice may indeed trigger radicalism as history and religion seem only to serve as safe havens for radicalist arguments.

As recorded in many interviews with Samudra, he rarely cites verses of the Koran or hadiths which, if he had, could have served to enhance his first argument, namely his perception of injustice.

Here, wisdom and a cautious approach will help us to play a better role in seeking a solution. At the same time, we must restrain ourselves from radicalizing grass-roots groups for any purpose or interest.***

Addicted to mockery, incitement

Yogyakarta, September 21, 2012

This formula recurs repeatedly throughout Muslim countries blasphemy is always responded to with anger. For some Muslim groups, those who mock their sacred beliefs must be punished.

However, with no legal power to punish the mockers, rage is directed at whoever is considered as abetting in the mockery. The embassies of the United States, Germany and United Kingdom in the Middle East, despite having nothing to do with the movie Innocence of Muslims, were attacked in the subsequent protests against it. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens along with another three United States officials, entirely unconnected with the movie, were killed during an attack on a United States consulate in Libya.

In many cases, from Benedict XVI's speech in Germany, the Danish cartoons, to Geert Wilders' movie Fitna, it was the face of violent outrage that represented Muslims across the world. This time Sam Bacile, the pseudonymous maker of Innocence of Muslims, reaped similar dramatic outrage from Muslim groups from Benghazi to Jakarta to previous cases of blasphemy.

Let us make the case simple. Do you not see what will happen

when you continually show outrage at being mocked? People will think that their mockery works.

Rather than desisting from making fun of you, they will heap more ridicule on you.

Realizing that you are childish, having no ability to restrain yourself from fury, mockers will become more creative in their efforts to disparage you.

Indeed, mockers of Islam always get what they expect from their nasty ideas. They know that discrediting Islam — no matter how disreputable their sense of humor and artistic tastes are — is a risk worth taking. Upon hearing the death threats, the mockers go into hiding to attract more public attention. What is clear is that drawing cartoons and producing movies denigrating Islam and Muslims always yield more public outrage in the Muslim world than the mockers could ever hope for in their wildest imagination.

On the other hand, public anger can also serve as rhetoric and a method of political bargaining. Radicalism and conservatism find a medium by which Muslim solidarity can be roused.

As seen in various mass protests, self-victimization has indeed been an effective tool to produce a Muslim collective identity that had been marginalized during times of liberal democracy and free markets.

To put the point differently, amid the public outrage against the blasphemies committed by those want to take advantage of Muslim volatility, Islamism has gained a momentum to further agitate Muslim sentiment. The conspiracy theory suggesting that the West systematically weakens Islam is further borne out.

Imagine this. When a small child is faced with contempt from his bigger friend, the former shows anger in a rather unique way. The victim, who lacks the courage to face the bigger child, will throw a tantrum, during which the smaller child lashes out at other children of equal size. On the other hand, upon seeing the victim's outrage and overreaction to mockery, the bigger child feels a sense of satisfaction.

Surprisingly, both the mocker and victim enjoy the mockery game. Both parties are addicted to mockery. Whenever the bigger child repeatedly mocks the small one, the latter runs amok. Whereas the mocker takes pleasure in seeing the victim's delinquent violence,

the victim also exercises his power over his friends.

In other words, the two sides reap benefits. Not only is the producer of Innocence of Muslims satisfied at seeing the reactions against his work, conservative and radical Islamists also seize the momentum. Showing anger publicly is also an exercise of power.

The ritual of mass rallies are re-enacted in various cities across the Muslim world. Although most never see the movie, they pretend to get angry. Of course, their protest does not always convey their religious feelings but rather political gamesmanship.

Nonetheless, in Jakarta, the movie has not brought forth significant fruit. The radical groups — the FUI (Islamic Community Forum), HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) and FPI (Islam Defenders Front) — failed in their mission to exercise power in public.

As politics is always local, local issue dominate people's priorities in the capital city. Jakarta's gubernatorial election buried the radicals' reactions against the movie. Poor Bacile. Poor FUI, HTI and FPI!

All in all, when you fall into bankruptcy, like the alleged moviemaker who was imprisoned due to bank fraud, you need an alternative career and committing blasphemy against Islamic symbols sounds promising. If you want to attract the world's attention, so that major global news channels will mention your name, make a movie or draw a cartoon despising Muslims.***

Avoiding a Counter-productive Response to 'Blasphemies

Heidelberg, March 27, 2008

The burning issue concerning those who have irritatingly used sacred Muslim symbols, including sciptures and prophets, to express their insensitive opinions reached the 11th summit of the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference) in Dakar, Senegal earlier this month, forcing Muslim leaders throughout the world, including Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to respond (*The Jakarta Post*, March 15).

Islam, one of the world's largest religions, cannot be divorced from its followers -- Muslims. Owing to this, the latter, to facilitate their devotion and practices in modern times, have actively created 'Islamic culture'.

Islam has become an inspiration, if not the basis, for the creation of many new cultures across many nations in the world, as has been the case with other religions, including Christianity in the western world.

The vital point to be made here is those who "attack" religious symbols also attack other cultures.

In scholarly tradition, works that criticize certain cultures or traditions must be accepted, particularly when new findings benefit the community, for example, by promoting new levels of self reflection and self-improvement.

However, the results of some recent derogoteory outbursts aimed at other cultures' symbols remain unclear, besides from their clear provocation of those attached to religion of the decried symbols.

What is clear is that many protesters of the pictures published by Danish cartoonists, a film by Theo Van Gogh and Aayan Hirsi Ali and an unseen film by Geert Wilders have used these examples to justify their own stereotypical views.

Such protesters recalled the "conspiracy theory" that the West, together with Christians and Jews, aim to attack Islam, if not annihilate it altogether.

In doing so, the protestors have blamed the West for the many problems they are currently facing resulting in many taking this damaging stereotype to heart.

The following questions must be directed at those who continue to produce sarcastic material in full awareness of the consequences: Do they wish to spread this stereotype throughout the world?; Do they wish to see the stereoytpe given legitimacy?

Many of those who value reason and love peace hope such fears do not materilaize.

Unsympathetic critics have merely succeeded in increasing unfounded hate. Online debates have proven this, their content frequently distubing and their comments often irrelevant, but we can not ignore them because they contain real opinions.

It must be clear to anyone, whether religious or not, that there can be no place for hatred or racisim if different cultures are to exist peacefully.

Wilders' statement is provocative and is not representitive of Europe, nor any one of its constituent countries.

How can you ban the Koran when even European universities perform strgent reaserches on Islamic history, texts and religious practises.

Those most involved in such researches have shown great respect for the Muslim community, they wish simply to conduct

an intellectual study of religion and culture, not to destroy of the subject matter of their own research.

From what I have felt day-to-day amid citizens of Mannheim and Heidelberg here is that most individuals have no interest in discussing sensitive religious issues. These are the people seen in the trains going to and from their offices or schools every day.

They do not really care about these issues, they prefer less irritating and more constuctive areas of conversation.

If everyone really suffered from Islamophobia, how could Muslims in this country survive?

Indeed, not all Muslims agree with the reactions to these materials have committed, calling to boycott the Netherlands products, burning its flags, and spreading the stereotypical views. It is noteworthy that the vast silent majority of Muslims do not want to exaggerate the above issue too much, rather willing to develop mutual understanding between Eastern and Western cultures.

It is not true that moderate Islam does not exist, as Wilder puts it in his interview. He knows that. Many Muslims, indeed, are liberal, progressive, and critical. Does he want to see his assumption to happen?

Whereas the beliefs hold by many who want mutual understanding among various cultures can perhaps be threatened, the wisest solution is expected. As regard to the call from OIC's summit, taking legal action to those who committed "blasphemies" seems unrealistic and perhaps counter-productive.

Imagine among the possible side effects to come, as this can be used to persecute any Muslim critics themselves, whose scientific, scholarly, journalistic, or aesthetic works aim at the betterment of Muslim community.

Indeed, Muslim community needs to evolve, as the Western one have done so in the spirit of enlightenment. In this vein, Islam as a basis for Muslim cultures and traditions also needs critical insights, and they should not be considered as Islamophobia.***

Sensational Cartoons no Longer a Burning Issue

Heidelberg, September 7, 2007

Unlike last year when Muslims in Indonesia and across the world reacted angrily to 12 controversial cartoons published by Danish daily Jyllands-Posten, few protests greeted a sensational cartoon printed by Swedish daily *Nerikes Allehanda* at the end of last month. The cartoon depicts the Prophet Muhammad as a dog.

I attempt to see the cartoon issue from the cultural point of view. For the sake of argument, the matter is a problem of cultural differences, less political, much less theological ones. It is obvious that Danish and Swedish cartoonists are neither politicians nor theologians by profession. They are simply cartoonists.

The cartoon controversy illustrates the significant differences between Asian cultures, on the one hand, and European or Western ones, on the other. This is with regard to the use of cartoons as satire in the public realm and the standard of politeness in each culture.

Let us take the following example. Almost at the same time as the Swedish cartoon appeared, the Malaysian Tamil-language newspaper *Makkal Osai* published a picture of Jesus smoking and drinking. Many Christians in Malaysia, as well as people of other

faiths, found it offensive. Despite the editor's public apology, the Malaysian government suspended the newspaper for a month.

In view of the *Makkal Osai* case it is misleading to assume that the satirical cartoons appearing in Denmark and Sweden gave offense merely because of Islamic theology. Nor does this case provide support for the notion of Islam and Muslims as scapegoats, since Malaysian Christians were also affected by the cartoon.

Different cultures interpret freedom of expression differently. In Europe, it is perhaps acceptable to mock certain public figures, but it is hard to do the same in Asian countries. In Asia, people still respect certain boundaries. The Malaysian government, for example, interfered with public freedom. This was not the case in Denmark and Sweden.

In a globalizing world, all cultures find themselves increasingly interlocked. There can be no hope of successfully imposing one's own cultural values simply by ignoring the values of others. Instead, a certain element of compromise and tolerance is required. This is merely a normative rule.

This is what should be and yet it does not describe what has actually happened. The reality is that certain cartoonists insist on living wholly according to their own cultural values and have published works that Muslims have found "insulting".

If the case is to be treated as a cultural problem, it follows that Muslims should not respond to the cartoon seriously, as if dealing with a theological issue. Muslims will only waste energy in doing so. In turn, the situation will become worse. The controversy has already cost us too much in terms of economics, politics, humanity, and the future relations between East and West.

Nobody disagrees that insulting another culture is wrong. Former United States president Bill Clinton called the cartoon case "appalling". Prominent Indonesian intellectual, Father Franz Magnis Suseno, would also likely agree with this. In line with this, it is hard to accept that this satirical cartoon was aimed at constructive criticism of the Muslim community, since the best criticism would come from the insider's perspective and with its own cultural values.

Secretary general of the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, accorded the cartoon case

too much importance by addressing it in a recent press release. Condemnation of the cartoon and cartoonist is simply not a matter that merits the high-level attention of the OIC. Let it be a problem among cartoonists. Their work is intended to be humorous. Why must we take it seriously?

To elevate this problem to the level of politics is unrealistic. It seems impossible for the Swedish government to immediately take action against the artist and the publisher, as demanded by the OIC.

It seems Sweden considers the cartoon to be the work of an individual. As such, the government of Sweden is not responsible for it nor does it wish to interfere with the freedom of expression in Sweden. Thus, it becomes a matter of choice whether to elevate a mere cartoon to the level of a political or theological matter. Doing so will only cause further problems.

It is better for us to ignore a provocative cartoon by pretending that we have never seen it, keeping in mind the intended element of humor as well as the fact that a cartoonist is neither a theologian nor politician.

It appears that harsh reactions from Muslims is exactly what cartoonists want to see. Such reaction will motivate similar cartoons in the future.

On the other hand, if the Muslim public ignores offensive religious cartoons -- which may continue to appear from time to time in the media-- the cartoonists will likewise lose interest and turn their attention to other things.

Instead of mocking each other, we might make friendship cartoons, as Indonesian and Australian artists in Bali have recently done.***

Listening to the speech of Pope Benedict XVI

Heidelberg, September 19, 2006

During his visit to his home country Germany, Pope Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) dropped in on Thursday Sept. 12, 2006, at his former Regensburg University. From 1969 to 1977 he was a professor of dogmatics at the school and this year he delivered a speech there, broadcast live on many German TV channels. More than 25,000 people in the hall of the university welcomed him and after the long formalities and various choirs, he spoke about *Glaube*, *Vernunft und Universitaet* (Faith, Reason and University).

The speech drew my interest as a Muslim, who by accident had turned on the TV and watched the live broadcast. The original text of the pope's speech can be read at *www.oecumene.radiovaticana.org/ted/Articolo.asp?c=94864*. During his speech, the pope raised at least three concepts that seemed related directly to the current Muslim world and its relationship to the West. First, he mentioned three important scriptures in the modern world: the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran. He clearly stated that they were "*drei Gesetze* (three rules/laws)."

Second, he said the readers of the scriptures, the Christians and Muslims, should understand them through reasoning, not violence. To quote him directly, "*Der Glaube ist Frucht der Seele, nicht des Koerper* (faith is an expression of the soul not the body)." Taking an example, he said that to believe in the existence of God is to think with reason, not to use threats.

Therefore, any use of violence, war or weapons in the relations among believers of the same -- or different -- religion is unacceptable. God, he said, should be understood with "logos/words."

In doing so, the pope defined how and why God exists. In the Muslim tradition, *logos* may be equated to the *kalam* of both the classical and modern Muslim intellectuals. In both *logos* and *kalam*, people are told to exercise their intellectual facilities, to think of the theology rather than take up arms. As a Muslim, I totally agree with this, and I think nobody would argue it. Then the pope raised the interfaith dialog issue. In his careful words and wisdom, he made an example of the dialog in the past between Byzantium Caesar Manuel II Palaeologos in 1391 and an educated Persian about relations between Islam and Christianity. In short, the dialog led to a conclusion that the use of reasoning should be put higher than violence in matters of faith. Accordingly, the dialog should not be performed by using weapons or threats. The parties involved should exercise their commonsense to understand others, the pope said. Listening to the pope's speech one may also relate this issue to the contemporary crisis in the current world, in the Middle East or even in Indonesia. Although the pope mentioned the word jihad in his speech, he did not comment further on the issue.

After listening to the speech as a whole, one might question why the peace of the world is under threat. It is because people tend to use weapons to solve problems rather than sitting down together and talking. The former is violence, whereas the latter is reasoning.

In the past, during the Renaissance, many people argued against the existance of religions, especially against the Church. Religion was far from a reasoned ideal of humanity, people were told. People repeatedly questioned the role of faith in society and was not strange that a figure like Friedrich Nietzsche emerged.

In many of his works he provoked us to think about the origin of humanity, good, evil and religion. That was then, this is now. The current world situation seems to be little about deep thinking and more about politics; with religion used to justify violence for political ends. One example is United States President George W. Bush's speech commemorating the five-year anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, which is also available at *www.iht.com*. He described when the terrorists ".... murdered people of all colors, creeds, and nationalities -- and made war upon the entire Free World."

The speech was made in the context of the numerous victims of the collapse of the twin towers. It was delivered on a day of mourning and it stressed that the security of the nation should be a top priority. It, of course, was Bush's right and duty to say this as a politician. After that, the president spoke about the actions taken against the people responsible for the disaster: "Since that day, America and her allies have taken the offensive in a war unlike any we have fought before." During recent days the popularity of Bush and his Republican Party has been under extreme pressure and the Democrats will take any chance to lead public opinion, as the mid-term elections draw nearer. Bush reminded his people that "Dangerous enemies have declared their intention to destroy our way of life."

It would be misleading to compare the speech of the pope to that of the United States president; each serves its own purpose and has its own context. The first speaker is a religious leader, while the second is a head of state.

However, one thing is relevant. Both spoke about violence and enmity. Although the pope does not single out specific parties for using violence, reading his speech most people will understand that every war is violence. The pope delivered a clear message of peace. ***

Another Side of Israel

Heidelberg, April 28, 2007

There are many Indonesian Muslim leaders who will certainly blow up the issue, with regard to the possible arrival of Israeli parliament members in Bali to attend the 116th Conference of the IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union), from April 29 to May 4. A few have even declared that Muslims will take to the streets to protest the Israelis.

It is not hard to guess, however, who the main proponents of this idea are. To begin with, there are the leaders of the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), such Hidayat Nur Wahid, who is currently speaker of the MPR (People's Consultative Assembly), and Tifatul Sembiring, PKS president.

Fauzan Ali Anshori, a leader of the MMI (Indonesian Mujahidin Council)), subscribes to the same view. It is also reported that the head of the DDII (Council of the Indonesian Islamic Call), Kholil Ridwan, has made more or less the same threat in statements.

Let us set aside these voices for a moment to turn to Indonesia's and Indonesians misleading views of Israel and Jews.

It may be well that the negative views over Israel are primarily based on supposedly theological considerations. Many hold literal meanings of the numerous verses of the Koran, such as the story that is contained in chapter two of al-Baqarah and elsewhere.

The Jews, according to the story, were always hostile to their own prophets, whom God had sent to guide them.

Others have also interpreted literally the story of the sinful acts committed by the tribes of Qurayza, Nadir and Qunayqa in classical Muslim literature. The story goes that these tribes betrayed the Prophet Muhammad, which brought about their expulsion from the city of Medina.

What concerns us here is that, according to these incorrect views, today's Jews are seen by some as no different from the past ones, in terms of their sinful acts, regardless of the distance of over a millennium and half between the time of writing of the classical literature and the present. This opinion, of course, begs for a revision, due to its erroneous historical ground.

There is also the complex context of each phase of human history during a millennium and half in which a simple generalization cannot be easily accepted. Can we judge today's people on the basis of their allegedly ancestors?

As regards the current issues related to modern Israel, these always seem too sensitive to be addressed in the public realm. This is due to the fact that public opinion seems to fail to catch any quick changes in Middle Eastern politics, and the dynamic attitudes embraced by some Arab leaders themselves. We seem merely to stick to the old prejudice that any Israeli elements should be rejected theologically and politically.

This view has often been justified by the unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territory.

However, our understanding of the issue is, one can perhaps say, too limited, because we tend to have a one-sided perspective. Thus, we have always maintained that we stand with the Muslims, the victims, the oppressed -- against the others who have oppressed. In addition, we have never attempted to understand the issue from another perspective, such as Israel's.

In fact, a brave example has been given by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who offered real talks between Arab countries and Israel on the occasion of an Arab summit just few weeks ago. Although this has not been responded to positively by the Israelis, this attempt, without a doubt, deserves appreciation.

One may infer that mere antagonism has led us to nothing

but more disaster. So why do we not try to sit down and talk? Why do we not try to better understand each other? As a rule, in an ideal reciprocal understanding, one party should understand the intentions of another and should accommodate its interests. Any prejudices against another should be discarded.

If King Abdullah himself has offered talks, is there any reason to prevent Indonesia from talking with Israeli? Can we set aside our old prejudices for a moment? At the least, can we see the issue from both sides, not merely hold our own version of reality?

It is noteworthy that attempting this would not reduce our solidarity with the long-suffering Palestinians.

What have we gained and how much have we helped the Palestinians by our current approach of antagonism and prejudice against Israel? Is that the best solution? It seems to be time to rethink the best role for Indonesians in the Middle East. Should we sharpen the conflict by ignoring one of the parties involved, or should we talk to both parties?

Nevertheless, let us just return to our main theme. At the government level, just accepting the Israeli MPs seems to be much less problematic, as the Indonesian foreign minister, Hassan Wirajuda, diplomatically put it, saying it is impossible to reject them. As mentioned earlier, a few parties will disagree and will protest this. However, the vast majority of Indonesians will watch TV and will enjoy the news while drinking a cup of coffee or tea.***

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IKHLAS BERAMAL

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Al Makin is a lecturer at the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Among his latest works: *Challenging Islamic Orthodoxy: Accounts of Lia Eden and Other Prophets in Indonesia* (Springer 2016); *Representing the Enemy: Musaylima in Muslim Literature* (Peter Lang 2010); *Keragaman dan Perbedaan: Budaya dan Agama dalam Lintas Sejarah Manusia / Diversity and Difference: Culture and Religion in Human History* (Suka Press 2016); *Antara Barat dan Timur: Melampui Jurang Masa Lalu untuk Meniti Jembatan Penghubung Barat dan Timur/ Between West and East: To pass over the gap of the past to walk through the bridge connecting the West and East* (Serambi 2015). He also wrote several articles in reviewed journals. He got Ph.D from Heidelberg University (2008), MA from McGill University (1999), and BA from Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic Institute (1996). He was a research

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Islam is not merely about the Qur'an and Sunnah, but in practice the religion entails much more complex cultural, political, and societal elements which shapes a religious tradition. Al Makin's essays collected in this book presents an observation for at least eight years telling us Islam and these factors in Indonesian context have intertwined (**Professor Yudian Wahyudi**, *Rector UIN Sunan Kalijaga*).

This timely publication of several articles written by Al Makin during the last eight years offers the reader a clear view of the issues that challenge Indonesian Islam today, which, in turn, challenge Indonesia's post-Suharto democracy, still unsure of itself. Precisely by focusing in short reflections on actual problems the reader will find reliable information and critical evaluation of key issues Indonesia faces today (**Professor Franz Magnis-Suseno**, *Driyarkara School of Philosophy, Jakarta*).

This book comes in a due time. It critically reflects the most current situation of Muslim in Indonesia. Plurality and religiosity in the name of patriotism always becomes a topic of the day elsewhere in the world. Dr. Al Makin amongst the small group of young Indonesian academician who writes and publishes in English. International community waits for a long time to have such publication by the insider to fully understand what is really going on in the (imagined) moderate Indonesian Islam (**Professor Amin Abdullah**, *Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta*).

This Al Makin work covers various issues dealing mostly with Indonesian Islam in its relations with current Indonesian political, social and cultural changes. Written originally as columns, this book critically examines different subjects ranging from 'majority-minority' relations; religious issues including institutions such as MUI to morality, conservatism and radicalism. With its wide-range contents, this book contributes to a better understanding of current development of Indonesian Islam, Indonesian politics and other related issues (**Professor Azyumardi Azra**, *CBE, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta*).

This is an important, wide ranging, collection of essays concerning nationalism, religion and pluralism in contemporary Indonesia. Al Makin is a powerful voice for reason, restraint, human rights and democratic values in the world's third largest democracy and most populous Muslim nation. Written over the course of a decade, they offer important perspectives on both the ongoing democratization of Indonesian society and attempts to use procedural democracy for undemocratic purposes. In today's world, in which democratic governance is increasing threatened by forces of sectarianism, ultra-nationalism and ethnocentrism masquerading as populism, it is critically important that scholars speak as "defenders of pluralism." In this volume Al Makin does exactly that (**Professor Mark Woodward**, *Arizona State University*).

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PLURALITY, RELIGIOSITY, & PATRIOTISM
ISBN 978-602-1326-55-8
9786021326558